**Ten Thoughts For Divorcing Parents**

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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If you are planning or have recently divorced, here are a few things to consider:

**1. There's Hope.**

Divorce itself has not been shown to cause long-term negative effects on children. It is the way that people handle the divorce which makes a difference. Most (about 80%) of children have basically adjusted to the divorce within one to two years after the initial separation. While feelings and issues remain, basic healing and stability usually occur.

**2. Nobody's perfect.**

People are not trained in how to get divorced or how to be a parent. We live in a changing world and there is no one right answer for what to do, such that many ways work and each situation is unique.

**3. The level of conflict is usually the biggest problem.**

Research has shown that a high level of conflict between the parents is more disruptive to children's development than whether their parents divorced. This research shows that a high-conflict marriage is harder on children than a low-conflict divorce. A high-conflict divorce is even worse.

**4. Stability is a key factor for children of any age.**

To the extent possible, parents should try to keep or create routines that the children can count on. Children need consistency on which to base their growth. Therefore, firm rules, regular activities, special time with the child, etc. are very helpful.

**5. Explain changes ahead of time, if possible.**

Children and adults adjust to change more easily if we can prepare first in our minds. No one likes surprises of the upsetting kind.

**6. Make time to listen to your child**

Children need to process feelings and worries much like adults do. Listening with interest and without judgment is important. Avoid reacting to what the child says with your own issues or conclusions.

**7. Avoid criticisms of the other parent in front of the child.**

This is easy to say and hard to do, but very important. Your child needs to have a relationship with the other parent [if this is safe] and children do better when they are not caught in the middle.

**8. Move slowly introducing children to your new relationships.**

Your child already has a lot to cope with. The more pressure to like someone new, the more negative their reaction.

**9. Get adult support for yourself.**

While you want to inform the child of what is going on, don't rely on the child for support. You need to talk, so find many people to talk to.

**10. Do fun activities with your child.**By enjoying time with your child, you will both feel better and be healthier for it. These suggestions won't make all pain go away. They might just help make the decision to divorce manageable for you and your children. If you have more detailed questions or concerns, continue reading on the subject; ask for resources from your child's school counsellor or teacher; or seek the help of a trained EAP or mental health professional. You might be surprised at how much help you can get to give you direction and quiet your worries.

## Quick Start Guide (for Avoiding A High Conflict Divorce)

## © 2011 by Bill Eddy and Randi Kreger*(Excerpt from SPLITTING: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing Someone with Borderline or Narcissistic Personality Disorder, by Bill Eddy & Randi Kreger, published by New Harbinger press, 2011)*

The more prepared you are, the less likely you will be to have a high-conflict divorce. While these hints can’t fully protect you, the sooner you take action on them, the better off you will be.

**1.** **Develop an emergency plan.** Your partner could assault or evict you at any time. Figure out a safe place to go, get some ready cash, and think about who can help you on short notice. Copy important records and keep them in a safe place.

**2.** **As soon as possible after they occur, write down accurate details of problems and events between you and your partner (and others) that could become issues in court.** Keep a journal or other written record of anything pertinent. If other people were present, write down their names. Save email and text-message correspondence in a safe place, especially copies of hostile, harassing, and controversial exchanges.

**3.** **Communicate very carefully and respectfully with your partner, because anything may be introduced into evidence.** Make any emails, whether initiated by you or in response to your partner, brief, informative, friendly, and firm. This is especially true if your partner’s emails are hostile. Avoid setups for violent confrontations, such as physically fighting over papers, or pushing and shoving. Indicate that you want to settle issues out of court to keep things calm, but always be prepared for the realistic possibility of court.

**4.** **Protect your children from conflicts between you and your partner.** Don’t say anything against your partner, no matter how provoked you might be, because anything could become evidence. Avoid:

* + Asking your children questions about the other parent
	+ Discussing court with your children or within their hearing
	+ Asking your children to compare you and your partner
	+ Giving your children choices between their two parents
	+ Exposing your children to your negative emotions

**5. Obtain a therapist to help you understand your partner’s behaviour, anticipate problems, deal with your emotions around the divorce or separation, and learn about yourself.**

**6. Hire an attorney with good communication skills, and consult with this professional to prepare for predictable crises and accusations.**

**7. Shut down Facebook, Twitter, and any other publicly accessible networking Web pages you may use.** You may wish to erase your browsing history from your computer. Make sure your passwords are secure. Make sure that what you want to keep private, such as letters or lists, is kept private.

**8. Tell your family and friends what to expect, how to respond, how they can help, and how to avoid splitting either of you into being viewed as all good or all bad.**

Begin all of these steps right away, even before separating, if possible. If your partner is a potential “persuasive blamer”, there’s a risk that the blamer might use anything you do:

* As an excuse for abuse or violence
* To spread rumors against you
* To publicly humiliate you
* As the basis for allegations and decisions against you in family court and possibly other courts

## Before You Go To Family Court

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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 **MAKE SURE YOU HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS:**  In Family Court, the judge will never really know what is going on in your case.  The family court’s job is to decide narrow legal issues based on limited permissible evidence.  Hearings are mostly short and to the point.  In real life, Family Court is not like most court cases on television or the movies – or even the news. Trials are rare, as most cases are resolved by hearings and/or settlement by agreement of the parties – often with the help of knowledgeable attorneys.

**DO NOT EXPECT VALIDATION OR VINDICATION**:  The judge does not decide your character as a person – or who has been “all good” or “all bad.”  In Family Court, it is assumed that both parties have contributed to the breakup of the family and that it is not a matter of “fault,” but of “irreconcilable differences.”  Finding fault is against the principles of Family Court.  Instead, family courts focus on problem-solving.  If the court finds that someone has acted improperly, then the focus is on What Should Be Done Now – such as modifying parenting time, support, property division, issuing restraining orders, and in rare cases sanctions may be ordered.  Rather than punishment and blame, the court prefers to order drug treatment, domestic violence programs, individual counselling, and parenting classes.

**AVOID EMOTIONAL REASONING**:   When people are upset, our perceptions can be distorted temporarily or permanently.  Our emotions may cause us to jump to conclusions, view things as “all or nothing,” take innocent things personally, fill in “facts” that are not really true, unknowingly project our own behaviour onto others, and unconsciously “split” people into absolute enemies and unrealistic allies.  This happens at times to everyone, so check out your perceptions with others to make sure they have not been distorted by the emotional trauma of the divorce and related events.  Many cases get stuck in court for years fighting over who was lying, when instead it was emotional reasoning which could have been avoided from the start.

**PROVIDE THE COURT WITH USEFUL INFORMATION:**  The judge does not know your family or your issues, except for the information that is properly submitted to the court. Make sure to provide important information, even if it is embarrassing.  The court cannot sense the behaviour of each party.  If you have an abusive spouse, the court needs sufficient information to make helpful decisions.  If you hold back on important information, it may appear that abusive incidents never occurred and that you are exaggerating or making knowingly false statements.  If you are accused of actions you did not take, the court will not know this information is inaccurate or false unless you sufficiently inform the court.

**BE CAREFUL ABOUT UNVERIFIABLE INFORMATION:**  The accuracy of the information you provide to the court is very important.  Based solely on what you say in declarations or testimony in court, the judge may make very serious orders regarding the other party, yourself, your children, and your finances.  If it later turns out that you made false or reckless statements -- even if you were well-intentioned -- there may be negative consequences, such as sanctions (financial penalties), loss of parenting time or restricted contact with your children.

**TRY TO SETTLE YOUR CASE OUT OF COURT:**  Today there are many alternatives to going to court which can be used at any time in your case, including Mediation, Collaborative Law, negotiated agreements with attorneys, and settlement conferences assisted by a temporary settlement judge.  The expense for each of these is much less than for court hearings and prolonged disputes.  You have nothing to lose, and you can still go to court afterwards if you do not reach a full agreement. By trying an out-of-court settlement, you can limit animosity and protect yourself and children from the tension of court battles for months or years.

**You Know You're Taking It Personally When...**

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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When you are involved with a High Conflict Person (HCP) whether personally or professionally, you have experienced how easy it is to get "hooked" into the conflict and how difficult it is to not take it personally. You can recognize the signs of taking it personally and learn how to manage your own emotions and work on solving the problem.

You know you’re taking it personally when…

* You feel you have to *defend* yourself.
* You feel emotionally *hooked* with fear or anger.
* You feel the natural *“fight, flight, or freeze”* responses.
* You start thinking *It’s All Your Fault!* about the other person.
* You think there’s only *one way* to deal with this problem and you have no choice.
* You feel you have to *prove* something to the other person or to other people.
* You feel the other person is *knowingly* taking advantage of you.
* You feel the other person is *knowingly* getting away with something.

With this list, I’m not saying that HCP’s actions are okay and you should just ignore them.  In a future article I’ll discuss other methods of dealing with the HCP’s misinformation and misbehaviour.  For purposes of this article, I’m just saying you’ll become emotionally hooked and much less effective in dealing with an HCP if you get stuck thinking or feeling these things.

The goal is to solve the problem.  HCP’s avoid solving problems by becoming preoccupied with blame.  If you take it personally and respond in a similar manner, you’ll prolong the dispute, increase the frustration you experience, and possibly appear as though you’re an HCP (or the only HCP) to other people who become involved in the case.

Remind yourself that it’s unconscious.  This high-conflict behaviour isn’t a conscious process for the HCP.  He or she is not “knowingly” taking advantage of you.  His or her actions are driven by unconscious personality patterns.  This doesn’t mean that everything they do is unconscious.  Most HCP’s I’ve handled have lied about something and knowingly engaged in behaviour that’s improper.  But they’re driven to do these “bad” things for unconscious reasons.

There’s always been a Target of Blame.  Before you and after you, the HCP will have treated somebody else the same way—because it’s about the HCP’s personality pattern of blame, not about you.  This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t consider changing your own behaviour, re-examining your own values, or making different decisions.  You should always be considering ways to change and improve your life.  It just means the cause of the emotionally intense and negative feedback from an HCP is his or her personality.

Maintain your own mental and physical health.  You’re much less likely to be triggered by an HCP when you’re feeling good.  You don’t take on as much blame and it’s easy to see that it’s not all anyone’s fault.  On the other hand, when we get run down we’re more likely to lash out at others and easily allow ourselves to get emotionally hooked.  This part is our own responsibility—our own part of the problem.

And we must be continually aware of this.  Getting exercise and enough sleep are good practices.

Get support and consultation.  Checking out our responses with trusted friends or a therapist is essential when responding to a High Conflict Person.  We often aren’t conscious of when we’re being defensive.  Friends and therapists can be very helpful in seeing what you can’t see.  They can suggest positive responses you might not be able to think of under stress.

Don’t engage in a personal battle.  If you’re already engaged in a personal battle, then disengage now.  At any time, you can let go of taking it personally.  Remember, HCP’s are more comfortable making it simple and personal.  It doesn’t mean they’re happy doing this; it’s just that it’s familiar to them.  They feel safer being engaged in a conflict that’s personal.  So, you’ll naturally feel like responding personally.

Once you realize you’re about to respond personally, tell yourself:  ***Don’t engage!***  If you have already started responding in a personal, defensive manner, you can still tell yourself:  ***Disengage!***This part is up to you.  Remember:  Don’t take it personally.  You don’t have to defend yourself.  It’s not about YOU!

## Yes, No Or I'll Think About It

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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Whether in a divorce, a workplace dispute, or a conflict with a neighbour, it’s easy to get caught up in defending our own behaviour and point of view. This is especially true when we are dealing with a high conflict person (HCP). They quickly “push our buttons,” and it’s easy to react before we know it. They often seem driven to engage in negative conversations rather than trying to solve problems. The focus quickly becomes personal attacks and counter-attacks.

But you don’t have to join in. Instead, you can use two simple steps that seem to help, no matter what setting you are in. If you think you are going to be dealing with an HCP, avoid getting hooked and feeding the conflict by reminding yourself of these two steps before you start talking. And if you are in the middle of an argument, you can always shift to this approach.

First, let’s look at a couple of typical high conflict arguments in divorce and workplace disputes:

**DIVORCE:**

Joe [responding to negative feedback]:  “So what! Sometimes I have to work late on Fridays, so I’ll be late for picking up the kids. You’ll just have to live with it if you want me to keep my job. You don’t give a s—t about how hard I work to pay you child support!”

Mary: “You are so insulting. I have half a mind to go back to court and just end your visitation. Wait ‘til the judge sees all these rude emails you keep sending to me!”

**WORKPLACE:**

Steve: “You always talk loud in your cubicle next to mine. You are a rude and insensitive person. I don’t know why you had to pick this cubicle. It was really pleasant in this office before you moved in!”

Sharon: “You know, you’re an a—hole. I have to make a lot more calls than you do. How can you say such B.S. You know you’re the busybody here. Nobody likes you. They’ve all told me, behind your back!”

Instead of getting caught up in these defensive and personal disputes, just focus on two steps:

1)    At any point in the dispute, you can say “What do you propose?” Or you can just make a proposal.

2)    In response to a proposal, you can simply say: “Yes” “No” or “I’ll think about it.”

       (If you can both agree to use this approach, you probably are not dealing with an HCP.)

**1.   First Person: MAKE A PROPOSAL**

Whatever has happened before is less important than what to do now. Avoid trying to emphasize how bad the problem is. With a high conflict person, this just triggers more defensiveness. Plus, people never agree on what happened in the past anyway. Picture a solution and propose it.

For example, in the DIVORCE dispute:  “If you’re going to be late to pick up the kids on Fridays, then I propose we just change the pickup time to a more realistic time. Instead of 5pm, let’s make it 6:30pm.”

Or in the WORKPLACE dispute: “I propose that we talk to our manager about finding a better cubicle for you, since you have so many phone calls that need to be made.”

**2.  Second Person: YES, NO, or I’LL THINK ABOUT IT**

All you have to do to respond to such a proposal is say: Yes, No, or I’ll think about it. You always have the right to say: Yes, No, or I’ll think about it. Of course, there are consequences to each choice, but you always have these three choices at least. Here’s some examples of each:

**YES:** “Yes, I agree. Let’s do that.” And then stop! No need to save face, evaluate the other person’s proposal, or give the other person some negative feedback. Just let it go. After all, hostile attacks are not about you. They are about the person making the hostile attack. You are better off to ignore everything else.

**NO:**  “No, I don’t want to change the pickup time. I’ll try to make other arrangements to get there on time. Let’s keep it as is.” Just keep it simple. Avoid the urge to defend your decision or criticize the other person’s idea. You said no. You’re done. Let it drop.

**I’LL THINK ABOUT IT**:  “I don’t know about your proposal, but I’ll think about it. I’ll get back to you tomorrow about your idea. Right now I have to get back to work. Thanks for making a proposal.”  Once again, just stop the discussion there. Avoid the temptation to discuss it at length, or question the validity of the other person’s point of view. It is what it is.

When you say “I’ll think about it,” you are respecting the other person. It calms people down to know you are taking them seriously enough to think about what they said. This doesn’t mean you will agree. It just means you’ll think about it.

**MAKE A NEW PROPOSAL:** After you think about it, you can always make a new proposal. Perhaps you’ll think of a new approach that neither of you thought of before. Try it out. You can always propose anything. (But remember there are consequences to each proposal.) And you can always respond: Yes, no, or I’ll think about it. (And there are consequences to each of those choices, too.)

**AVOID MAKING IT PERSONAL:** In the heat of the conflict, it’s easy to react and criticize the other person’s proposals—or even to criticize the other person personally, such as saying that he or she is arrogant, ignorant, crazy or evil. It’s easy and natural to want to say: “You’re so stupid it makes me sick.” Or: “What are you, crazy?” “Your proposal is the worst idea I have ever heard.” But if you want to end the dispute and move on, just ask for a proposal and respond “Yes” “No” or “I’ll think about it.”

## Responding To Hostile Email

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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*Hostile mail – especially email – has become much more common over the past decade. Most of this mail is just “venting,” and has little real significance. However, when people are involved in a formal conflict (a divorce, a workplace grievance, a homeowners’ association complaint, etc.) there may be more frequent and intensely hostile mail. There may be more people involved and it may become legally significant. You would be amazed at the embarrassing hostile emails that show up in court cases these days. Therefore, how you handle hostile mail may impact the future of long-term relationships and the outcome of a case. The following are some suggestions based on my experience with high conflict people:*

**1. Do you need to respond?**
Much of the hostile mail today does not need a response. Letters from (ex-) spouses, angry neighbours, irritating co-workers, or attorneys do not usually have legal significance. If someone says nasty things about you or someone else in a letter, the letter has no power, unless you give it power. Often, it is designed to get you engaged in a battle of emotional venting for the sake of relieving the writer’s anxiety.

Generally, responding with similar emotions and hostility will simply escalate things without satisfaction, and you will just get a new piece of hostile mail back in return. In most cases, you are better off not responding. However, some letters and emails develop power when copies are filed in a court or complaint process – or simply get sent to other people. At that time, it may be important to respond to inaccurate statements of fact with accurate statements of fact (leaving out your opinions). Therefore, sometimes you need to respond.

 **2. Don't Respond Emotionally**
Brain research shows that our ability to think rationally is impaired when we are very upset–and hostile mail can trigger many emotions. Therefore, you do not want to respond until you have recovered from these emotions. This is a common mistake people make in quickly responding to hostile e-mails. Calm yourself down first, either by taking a break, getting some exercise, doing another project, talking to a friend or neutral relative, etc.

 **3. Determine Your Goal Before You Write**
Is your goal to get the other person to do something? If so, focus on what you want the person to do – not on what he or she did wrong. For example, if a neighbour has been loud, request that the person try to keep it quiet during specific times that are important to you. Avoid focusing on comments about the person’s character, such as saying he or she is rude, insensitive, or stupid. These do not motivate high conflict people. Once you have identified your goal, I recommend writing a B.I.F.F. response: Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm.

**BRIEF**

Keep your response brief. This will reduce the chances of a prolonged and angry back and forth. The more you write, the more the other person will be tempted to criticize in your writing. It also signals that you don’t wish to get into a dialogue. Just make your response, then end your letter.

Don’t take their statements personally (even if they were intended as personal attacks) and don’t respond with an item-by-item personal attack. It just escalates the conflict and keeps it going and going and going.

You don’t have to defend yourself to someone you disagree with. If your friends still like you, you don’t have to prove anything to those who don’t.

**INFORMATIVE**

The main reason to respond to hostile mail is to correct inaccurate statements which might be seen by others. “Just the facts” is a good idea. Focus on the accurate statements you want to make, not on the inaccurate statement the other person made. For example: “Just to clear things up, I was out of state on a trip on February 12th, so I would not have been the person who was making loud noises that day.”

Avoid negative comments, like little digs. Avoid sarcasm. Avoid threats. Especially avoid personal remarks, like those about someone’s intelligence, ethics or moral behavior. If the other person has a “high conflict personality,” you will have no success in reducing the conflict with personal attacks. While most people can ignore personal attacks or might think harder about what you are saying, high conflict people feel they have no choice but to respond in anger – and keep the conflict going and going.

Personal attacks rarely lead to insight or positive change.

**FRIENDLY**

While you may be tempted to write a response in anger, you are much more likely to reach your goal by writing in a friendly (and brief) manner. Consciously thinking about a friendly response will increase your chances of getting a friendly – or neutral response – in return. If your goal is to end the conflict, then being friendly has the greatest likelihood of success.

This does not mean that you have to be overly friendly. Just make it sound a little relaxed and non-antagonistic. Make it sound like you recognize their concerns. Brief comments that show your Empathy, Attention and Respect (E.A.R.) will generally calm the other person down, even if only for a short time.

**FIRM**

In a non-threatening way, clearly tell the other person your information or position on an issue. (For example: “That’s all I’m going to say on this issue.”) Be careful not to make comments that leave the door open to more discussion, unless you are negotiating an issue or want to keep a dialogue going back and forth. (Avoid comments that leave an opening, such as: “I hope you will agree with me that this does not need further discussion.” This invites the other person to tell you “I don’t agree.”)

Sound confident and don’t ask for more information, if you want to end the back-and-forth. A confident-sounding person is less likely to be challenged with further emails. If you get further emails anyway, you can ignore them, if you have sufficiently addressed the inaccurate information already. If you need to respond again, keep it even briefer and do not emotionally engage. In fact, it often helps to just repeat the key information using the same words. (“As I said in my email of March 6th, that is all I am going to say on this subject.”)

**Example**
Joe: “Jane, I can’t believe you are so stupid as to think that I’m going to let you take the children to your boss’ birthday party during my parenting time. Have you no memory of the last six conflicts we’ve had about my parenting time? Or are you having an affair with him? I always knew you would do anything to get ahead! In fact, I remember coming to your office party at the last job and witnessing you making a total fool of yourself in front of everyone – including flirting with everyone from the CEO down to the mailroom kid! Are you high on something? I think you have a personality disorder! Haven’t you gotten your finances together enough to support yourself yet, without flinging yourself at every Tom, Dick and Harry? ...” [And the email goes on like this for about 2 pages.]

Jane: “Thank you for responding to my email request to take the children to my office party. Just to clarify, the party will be from 3-5 on Friday at the office and there will be approximately 30 people there – including several other parents bringing school-age children. There will be no alcohol, as it is a family-oriented firm and there will be family-oriented activities. I think it will be a good experience for them to see me at my workplace. Since you do not agree, then of course I will respect that and withdraw my request, as I recognize it is your parenting time.” [And that’s the end of her email.]

Comment: Jane simply provided factual information, kept it brief, and did not engage in defending herself in response to Joe’s many accusations. Since this was just between them, she didn’t need to respond. If he sent this email to friends, co-workers or family members (which high conflict people often do), then she would need to respond to the larger group with more information, such as the following:

Jane: “Dear friends and family: As you know, Joe and I had a difficult divorce. He has sent you a private email showing correspondence between us about a parenting schedule matter. I hope you will see this as a private matter and understand that you do not need to respond or get involved in any way. Almost everything he has said is in anger and not at all accurate. If you have any questions for me personally, please feel free to contact me and I will clarify anything I can. I appreciate your friendship and support.”

Comment: Again, Jane has kept it brief, informative, friendly and firm. With other people involved, it is important to keep a door open for communication and show a willingness to correct any misconceptions, if necessary. There is no need to address all of Joe’s allegations in this group email, as it will just escalate the dispute and other people will feel they have to get involved.

The above example has the man sending the hostile email. My experience in many court battles is that hostile mail is fairly equally sent by men and women – and both men and women have a hard time not getting engaged in these battles.

This example also includes a reference by Joe that he thinks that Jane has a personality disorder. While I write books and give seminars on the topic of personality disorders in legal, workplace and neighbour disputes, I strongly advise against telling someone that you think they have a personality disorder. The goal is to understand the patterns of behaviour and use this information to handle the person and solve the problem – not publicly label people. Those who are eager to say “you have a personality disorder” are more likely to be those with personality problems themselves.

 **Conclusion**

Whether you are at work, at home or elsewhere, a B.I.F.F. response can save you time and emotional anguish. The more that people handle hostile mail in a manner such as this, the less hostile mail there will be.

## Don't Use Force

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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 *“I won’t force the children to go with the other parent,” is one of the statements I hear sometimes from parents going through a separation or divorce.  This statement has become so common (three times in one day recently), that a short article on this subject may be helpful.*

**Expectations**

Parents have a lot of expectations for their children, for their own benefit. You expect them to go to school. You expect them to do their homework. You expect them to come home at night. You expect them to brush their teeth. You expect them to do their chores. You expect them not to swear in public. You expect them not to have sex. You expect them not to use drugs, etc., etc.

We use all of our resources to “force” them to do (or not do) these things. But we don’t use the word “force” with these activities. We use the word “expect” – a positive word for their long-term benefit, rather than a negative word. And your children get the message. So try not to use the word “force,” with all its negativity. Instead, use the positive word “expect.” “I expect you to go with your mother/father – we both expect that.”

**It’s Not an Option**

Of course, children will resist doing a negative option. They don’t want to see the dentist. They don’t want to go to school on some days. Even parents don’t want to go to work on some days. But most of us go to work anyway, because we need to get paid. It’s not an option to stay home.

Somehow, children get the message that going to the other parent’s house after a separation or divorce is optional. If you give them a choice and imply it will be a negative experience, any healthy child is going to want to avoid it. Since children have so few options in their lives, if you give them an option to avoid something negative, they will avoid it.

**Children Don’t Like Moving**

Most of the time, children like being where they are. When given a choice, many children who live in two households would rather stay where they are at the moment. It doesn’t mean that they don’t want to see their Mom or Dad, it just means that they don’t want to stop what they’re doing, get up, pack up, and go somewhere else. Once they get to the other house, they act just the same way. Don’t take it personally: most of the time children just prefer where they are and what they’re doing. They live in the present.

**Use Positive and Negative Consequences**

If children don’t do the things that we expect, we usually use consequences with them rather than physically picking them up and taking them. This is especially true with teenagers. Instead, we take away privileges or give them new opportunities when they succeed.

Take school, for example. If your child refuses to go to school, do you: Take them out for ice cream? Spend more personal time and attention with them? Take them shopping or to the movies? Allow them to watch TV all day?  Surf the internet? If you do, do you think they would increasingly stay away from school?  Of course.  I have worked with families where this occurred. Instead, if a child resists spending time with the other parent without a very good reason, use the same consequences you would use if they refused to go to school. And don’t blame it on the other parent – just be matter-of-fact. In a separation or divorce, attitude is everything.

**Avoid Assumptions**

In a separation or divorce, it’s easy to misinterpret a child’s resistance to spending time with one of the parents.  It may be about something very minor and the child will change his or her mood soon, unless you give this mood excessive attention or power.

It is easy for a parent to jump to the conclusion that the child has the exact same thoughts about the other parent, such as complicated anger about adult issues that the child may not know about or understand. Or you may be concerned that your child’s sadness or anger toward the other parent may mean he or she has been abused or treated badly. While these things could be true, be careful to check them out without making assumptions.

**Emotions are Contagious**

On the other hand, children do absorb their parent’s emotions. It’s an important part of how they learn about life, and how they stay connected to their parents. Recent brain research explains how “mirror neurons” cause children to mirror their parents’ emotions, as well as behaviour. So your child may have picked up your intense emotions about the separation or divorce, and show the exact same fear, sadness, or anger – yet have no logical explanation for it. While it may seem like the child has the same feelings and thoughts that you do, your child may actually just have the same feelings – your feelings.

So be careful not to let your child see or hear your upset feelings about the other parent. Arguments or physical confrontations between parents that are observed by a child can be particularly distressing for a child and may increase their resistance to one parent. Children need to be protected from their parents’ behaviour sometimes.

**Get Family Counselling**

If a child develops a resistance to spending time with one parent, it is potentially a serious problem which needs to be treated sooner rather than later. If there is a child abuse issue, it needs to be addressed and stopped. If there has been domestic violence (an incident or a pattern), then this is an important problem to be treated, rather than ignored. Children may be the first to show a problem which needs family attention. And if it is a child absorbing a parent’s negative emotions about the separation or divorce, this also needs to get addressed and resolved. Often the best approach is for a counsellor to meet with each parent and the child or children before resistance turns into refusal. And if a child is refusing to see a parent, then it is even more important to take this approach as soon as possible. By meeting with both parents at separate times with the child or children, parents can help and support each other in helping their child. Getting an individual counsellor for the child is less effective.

**Conclusion**

Maybe you can’t “force” a child to spend time today with one parent. But you can have consequences, investigate the situation, and get the help of a family counsellor. In the long run, it will be better for all of you.

**New Ways For Families Article (Excerpts)**

**By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.**

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One of the biggest problems in separation and divorce cases is the focus on finding "Who is to Blame?" And "What did he or she do wrong?" Except for obviously extreme behaviour (severe abuse or blatant lies), these are very subjective questions with few clear answers. In many cases, the parties (married or not, children or not) spend years in court attacking each other and defending themselves.

**[Suggestions for] COUNSELLING**

Each parent will discuss the following four issues with his or her individual therapist:

**A. New Ways of Thinking about your spouse and yourself:**

Overcoming all-or-nothing thinking. This can involve recognizing the strengths and weaknesses that each of you has. This also can involve all-or-nothing thinking about responsibility for the divorce, and about your view of the future. Learning skills for overcoming all-or-nothing thinking can be a tremendous help for all areas of life in our modern, rapidly changing world.

Recognizing emotional reasoning. Divorce can be a very stressful time and our emotions often influence our thinking. Learning skills for recognizing when our emotions are driving our thinking can help a lot.

Avoiding jumping to conclusions. It is common to jump to conclusions in a divorce. Learning skills to recognize and techniques for managing this tendency can relieve a lot of pressure and miscommunications.

Just discussing these and other new ways of thinking can help people become more self-aware and feel better too. This puts the realistic gray areas of life into perspective, rather than trying to fit them into all-or-nothing results, such as the court process reinforces.

**B. New Ways of Managing Your Emotions**

Many people in divorce feel driven by their emotions, and helpless to manage them. They don't know where their feelings come from and don't know that they can significantly predict, understand, and change their moods.

It can be very empowering to learn your triggers for experiencing overwhelming emotions, and how to manage them. You can gain more power and respect by learning how to calm yourself down in a crisis-which can help in many areas of your life.

It also helps to learn how to reduce the intensity of your responses to different problems, while still respecting your feelings. Then, you can be more able to address the problems successfully.

Sorting out mixed feelings is an important process in divorce and separation. A counsellor can help you look at each feeling and its importance in making your decisions. You can learn skills for managing feelings that seem to drive your decisions, so you can think things through more easily, which can help in all areas of your life.

**C. New Ways of Behaving toward your spouse and your child/ren**

This can include new ways of talking to your spouse and children, to be more effective at setting limits and solving problems peacefully. Building confidence in yourself is often the first step in becoming more assertive, rather than being passive or aggressive.

After a divorce, it helps to become more effective at limiting issues you will discuss with your former spouse, as well as limiting when, where and how you will communicate. Learning new ways of supporting your children in divorce is extremely important in determining how they will handle future events in their own lives. This can include problem-solving strategies for their future relationships as adults, as well as handling their relationship with the other parent.

In divorce, many parents become too flexible or too rigid in their behaviour toward the other parent. You can learn new ways of determining when to be flexible and when to be more firm, without encouraging a frustrating battle. This can include when to consider voluntary changes to the parenting schedule and arrangements for special events, and when to say No.

**D. Recognizing Your Positive Behaviours and Qualities**

During a divorce, many people lose track of their own positive qualities. It is much harder to adopt new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, when you are focused on the negative and what you have done "wrong." It is much more effective to build on the positive, and recognize your strengths and your successes.

It's easy to get overwhelmed as those around you criticize you and/or the other parent, or give you endless suggestions of you should run your life now. It's just a fact of human nature that it's much easier to build on the positive.

Many people have numerous effective techniques for solving problems, but don't use them during a divorce because their methods don't feel powerful enough or they are afraid that the other person won't respect them enough. Then they get in trouble for using less effective techniques that "feel strong" but really make them look bad. Respecting the effective techniques you already have helps make it possible to learn new techniques more easily.