

MOVING FORWARD: BEYOND THE CONFLICT WITH YOUR EX-PARTNER

Howard Hurwitz

One of the essential aspects of a successful post separation relationship with your ex-partner is moving beyond the conflict. It is widely understood by social science researchers and family law practitioners (ie. Lawyers, mediators and therapists), that those couples that are deemed to be high conflict, are those in situations where they remain 'engaged' to one another. The notion of 'engagement' seems odd to consider within the context of a separated or divorced couple, however, consider the following situations.

Despite a conflictual relationship (whether married, common-law or dating), couples can still be quite engaged or connected to one another after a bitter separation/divorce. Engagement between the couple still continues but, instead of being united around happy events, they are connected around arguments pertaining to financial issues, custody matters or parenting differences. Unlike a couple together in a satisfying relationship able to resolve differences on these issues, high conflict couples remain unresolved around their many differences. Henceforth, the notion of their 'engagement'.

How can disengagement occur? Most experts assisting high conflict families will advise parents to disengage from the conflict but not the parenting role. Specifically, consider the following strategies:

1. Tolerating different parenting styles. Your child's mother/father may have different views on a parenting issue. You may be right or they may be right. Often there is no perfect answer but arguing over which approach is right/wrong is bad for kids.
2. Both parents must come together on child safety (emotional and physical) so try to talk with the other parent about how the disputed issue will impact on the child from a safety perspective.
3. 'Pick your battles' with the other parent. Some issues are not worth arguing about....others are. Determine which category the current dispute fits into.
4. Manage the conflict with the other parent. Do what you can to not let it get out of control.
5. Manage your own emotional reaction so that you don't become out of control
6. Use a friend or family member whose judgement and objectivity you value as a 'sounding board' to help you find a solution to resolving the disputed issue.
7. Never engage the children in the conflict with the other parent.
8. Try to understand the other parent's perspective: is there a point of value underlying their position?
9. Remember, that you may 'win the battle, but lose the war' in the current dispute. In other words, you may get what you want now, but there could be an escalation in the parental conflict or a deterioration in your relationship with your ex-partner that will hurt your children.
10. If the conflict continues to escalate, ask yourself, 'what can I do to resolve this issue now?'

11. Never speak negatively about the other parent to or around the child. They should never be placed in a position where they feel the need to defend, or protect the other parent. It is not their conflict.