



M. Tamar Berg, MFT

Psychotherapy

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High conflict divorce

1. Many marriages end as a result of a traumatizing betrayal of the central trust in the relationship (e.g. a secret affair is discovered; betrayal about money or addiction; sudden separation...).

The end of the marriage is a major loss; strong feelings such as hurt, sadness, anger and guilt are involved. People going through divorce need a place to vent these feelings and need to be listened to. It is difficult to be a functional parent when you are in a deep crisis yourself. It is important to develop a support system for the family.

2. High conflict between parents is devastating for the children. Children feel strong loyalty to both parents. Children feel torn between parents or pushed to take sides, which creates incredible anxiety. A child may think: "What will happen if Mom or Dad gets mad at me? Maybe Mom or Dad will leave me, too." The conflict between parents accentuates the child's fear of abandonment. Especially younger children often take responsibility and blame themselves for the divorce or believe if they would only do the right thing the parents might get back together. Children need the love, attention and support of both parents to adjust to the changes of the divorce.
3. In high-conflict families the resentment and anger between the parents has piled up. Cooperation for the best interest of the children seems impossible. Blaming each other keeps the conflict going. A parent may say she/he can't stop the conflict (even though she/he wants to) because the other parent won't stop. A person who views herself as a victim of her ex-partner will not focus on her ability and options to reduce conflict. It is necessary to learn differentiation between feelings and behavior. What can one parent **do** to reduce conflict no matter how she/he feels and no matter what the other parent does?

4. Steps to reduce conflict

- Parents agree to and sign Parent Agreement Rules
- Parents form a business relationship, dedicated to decision making about the children
- Structured and time-limited parental contact (e.g. a weekly scheduled parents call with a prepared agenda, should not be conducted in front of the children)
- Role plays to rehearse interaction and try out better communication

5. Children need simple explanation about separation and divorce
To help them understand that they are not the cause of it. Most children show signs of grief following a separation or divorce. Preschoolers might feel guilty for causing problems, elementary-age children usually experience sadness and children over the age of nine often feel angry. Children need reassurance, love and extra support in this situation. They need explanations for all the changes that will occur. A regular visitation schedule, contact with both parents and a clear set of rules for both homes is most helpful.

6. If you feel you are going through a difficult divorce and need help in co-parenting and helping your children cope with the separation, feel free to contact me at 707-522-0446.

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