



Co-Parenting with a High Conflict Ex
Why It Doesn't Work

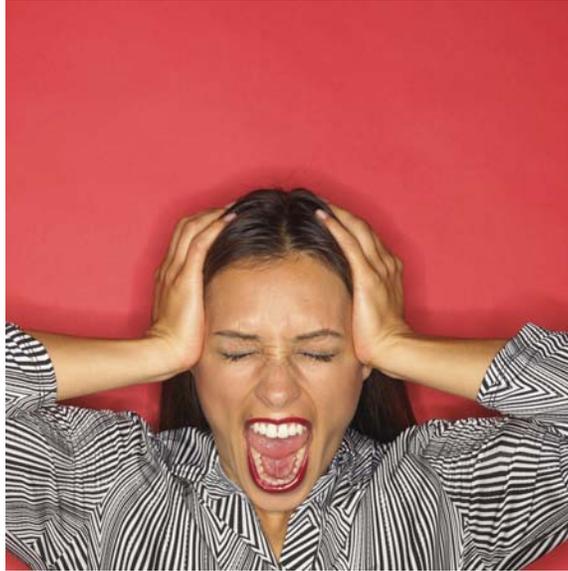


It is often assumed that in the aftermath of a divorce situation, both parties will look towards minimizing the impact that the significant, life-altering changes will have on the children born of the marriage or meaningful relationship. If a child is born from a non-meaningful relationship, the problems may be much more difficult. The term co-parenting (cooperative parenting) will rise to the top of the list of “must-dos” for the divorced parents. While this is workable in some situations, sadly, it is not often the norm in today’s society. After all, it is hardly a reasonable expectation that two adults who very likely have had significant differences in attitudes, expectations, and performances within the marriage will suddenly set those differences aside for the sake of effectively parenting their children. Those differences are what led to the dissolution of the marriage. Those differences led to the disputes over the division of marital assets. Worse still, those differences led to the disputes over custody of the children. Far too often, the conflict doesn’t simply end with the divorce. It carries on well into the future.

With the proliferation of cooperative divorce techniques such as:

- Collaborative Divorce
- Parenting Coordination
- Mediation
- Attorney-Assisted Negotiation

...more and more of the cases we see or hear about in the family court system are driven by high-conflict individuals. Many of these high-conflict divorce situations are driven by serious personality disorders.



Personality Disorders

Being able to co-parent effectively after a divorce is difficult enough under “normal” conditions. If your ex-partner has or is suspected of having a serious personality disorder, it is virtually impossible. Many experts agree that you will find at the root of many high-conflict divorce and custody disputes – mental illness in the form of one or more of several personality disorders.

Antisocial Personality: A pervasive pattern of disregard for the rights of others and rules of society. The Antisocial Personality ranges from individuals who are chronically irresponsible, unsupportive, con artists to those who have total disregard for the rights of others and commit criminal acts with no remorse, including those involving the death of victims. In clinical practice, the Antisocial Personality has near-total selfishness and typically has a pattern of legal problems, lying and deception, physical assault and intimidation, no regard for the safety of others, unwillingness to meet normal standards for work/support/parenting, and no remorse.

Can you see yourself effectively co-parenting with this condition? A person with Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) has a total disregard for the rights of all others. With a target parent on whom to perpetrate their rage, violence, and against whom to rebel, the normal parent can be in for a whirlwind of constant trouble. As if this reality wasn't scary enough, children with a parent suffering from this condition are at a much greater risk of developing APD themselves.

Borderline Personality: A pervasive pattern of intense yet unstable relationships, mood, and self-perception. Impulse control is severely impaired. Common characteristics include panic fears of abandonment, unstable social relationships, unstable self-image, impulsive/self-damaging acts such as promiscuity/substance abuse/alcohol use, recurrent suicide thoughts/attempts, self-injury and self-mutilation, chronic feelings of emptiness, inappropriate yet intense anger, and fleeting paranoia.

Aside from the instability of mood, the parent suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) suffers from an intense fear of abandonment. That fear will often drive them to create children who are enmeshed with them. By making children feel guilty about loving the other parent, visiting the other parent, even talking to the other parent – a child may withdraw from the normal parent. In a worst-case scenario, the enmeshed child will often align themselves with the BPD parent against the normal parent. The child often lives in an environment of intense guilt and fear of upsetting the BPD parent. The BPD's parenting is often ineffective because they cannot refer back to their own childhood experiences in order to gauge appropriate actions and reactions to situations involving their own children. Worse still, they are often emotionally uninvolved in the child's life.

Co-parenting with a Borderline is often impossible as BPDs handle the children as extensions of themselves. Therefore, it is not possible to treat the children separately from their own individual experiences. Their fears and anxieties are often projected onto the children and they must be protected from the target parent.

Histrionic Personality: A pervasive pattern of excessive emotional display and attention-seeking. Individuals with this personality are excessively dramatic and are often viewed by the public as the "Queen of drama" type of individual. They are often sexually seductive and highly manipulative in relationships.

No one matters more to the Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD) than themselves. The HPD is always looking to "put on a show" for others and usually with dramatic flair. The person suffering from HPD lives in a perpetual state of attention of love deprivation. This drives them very often to neglect a partner or children in their efforts to obtain the love and attention that they likely lacked as a child themselves. Much like the others, there is an underlying fear of abandonment which stifles the normal parent-child relationship. Constant "digs" and other denigration of the children during the early parenting stages will likely result in a child rejecting the normal parent's efforts to show love and care.

You can't co-parent with an individual who will put themselves above all others.

Narcissistic Personality: A pervasive preoccupation with admiration, entitlement, and egotism. Individuals with this personality exaggerate their accomplishments/talents, have a sense of entitlement, lack empathy or concern for others, are preoccupied with envy and jealousy, and have an arrogant attitude. Their sense of entitlement and inflated self-esteem are unrelated to real talent or accomplishments. They feel entitled to special attention, privileges, and consideration in social settings. This sense of entitlement also produces a feeling that they are entitled to punish those who do not provide their required respect, admiration, or attention.

The person suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is the be-all, end-all of everything. You can't co-parent with a person around whom the world revolves. They've done it better than you. They'll do it better than you. There is nothing you can do that will measure up in their eyes. The NPD has no concept of what it means to engage in teamwork. There is no parental coordinator or collaborative coach who can help get an NPD on an appropriate co-parenting track. There is only the narcissist's way of doing things. In many circles, including professional ones, the suggestion is that very young children need to be as far removed from the NPD parent as possible.

Much abuse can arise from mental illnesses and disorders and can be anywhere along the severity range from minor forms of abuse to more catastrophic ends. However, if none of the abuse has manifested itself in any provable form, it's highly unlikely that you'll find any relief in family court. Even having a confirmed diagnosis isn't enough to get appropriate attention in family court.



Plain ‘Ole Lack of Cooperation

Some might say that the most passionate relationships are rife with conflict. Of course, some of it is healthy and some of it rather unhealthy. When children are brought into the fold, it is a tie that binds the parents together forever. The marriage might have ended, but the relationship lives on. When a marriage ends, that leaves but one common-denominator between the two adults. That common-denominator is the child. It stands to reason, then, that the child will be the weapon of choice when it comes to perpetuating the conflict that existed within the marriage.

Chronic anger and perpetual conflict become firmly ingrained in the post-divorce relationship. Absent guidance or an authority (outside of the court) in an effort to make child-focused decisions; the arguing, controlling, acting-out, and uncooperative behavior continues on unabated.

Basic decisions are compromised and the abusive, destructive behavior persists. We’ve personally experienced prolonged debates over:

- When and how a child gets their hair cut.
- When and where custody exchanges will be made.
- In which extra-curricular activities the children will be involved.
- When and how often phone contact will be made.
- What types of clothing the children should wear.
- What types of movies and television shows are appropriate.
- What is an appropriate bedtime.

The destructive pattern persists with no expectations for change. There are no possibilities for agreement, conciliation, flexibility, or concession. No amount of education, begging, nor pleading will work.

Making matters worse, the high-conflict parent has a knack for finding and exploiting loopholes in existing court orders or parenting agreements. All the while, they manage to avoid any accountability. There is always someone or something else to blame. They are almost gleeful when it comes to shifting blame to the language of a specific edict on a written agreement. "It's not my fault that I can do this to you and the children!" That isn't what they say, but for certain, that's what you hear. As we've heard many times along our own journey, one parent's hatred of the other overrides their love for the children, assuming that they have any.

Co-parenting does not work if:

- One or both parents simply want to punish the other.
- The parents are constantly at each other's throats.
- One desires to litigate everything in an effort to avoid making a decision.
- The parents put children in the middle (of arguments or even basic communications).
- They confide in the children about inappropriate, "grown-up" details about the other parent or about the marriage.
- The focus is on money in the form of child/spousal support instead of the children's well-being.

The family court system, laws, and legislation in conjunction with prevailing public opinion about gender roles are complicit in promoting such adversarial posturing when it comes to child custody and co-parenting.



The Geographic Excuse

For any number of reasons, one parent is located some distance away. Someone is going to be the custodial parent and the other will be the non-custodial parent. If the distance is great enough, parenting time may be relegated to extended school breaks and perhaps a larger percentage of the summer vacation schedule. Due to these logistical constraints, the ability to co-parent is susceptible to being compromised.

That's not to say that a meaningful co-parenting arrangement isn't possible in such a circumstance. It's just very unlikely. Some reasons may include:

- The custodial parent takes a dominant position, using primary physical custody as the leverage despite their being a joint-legal custody designation. They commandeer
- The non-custodial parent voluntarily relinquishes or otherwise “gives up” trying to have a voice involving decision-making, disciplinary issues, school-related matters, religion, etc.
- The non-custodial parent, understandably, focuses more on entertaining the child given the limited amount of actual custodial time available. Important life-decisions end up taking a backseat to making their time available with the child primarily joyous, happy, and fun.

The bottom-line is that co-parenting in a long-distance situation is a very difficult achievement for all.



Substance Abuse

Obviously, alcohol and drug abuse severely impairs an individual's judgment. Few tasks in our lives will require more focus, concentration, and judgment than being a parent.

Make no mistake about the realities of substance abuse. Our nation's jails and prisons are overflowing with those guilty of various crimes associated with substance abuse. However, a prior criminal conviction is no guarantee of primary or sole parenting of your children. Further, if your ex-partner is a substance abuser who hasn't been caught and/or convicted, you're faced with some serious barriers to co-parenting.

Without undertaking a long description of the impact of various substances on one's ability to parent or co-parent, please understand that drug and alcohol abuse offer significant barriers to an appropriate co-parenting arrangement.



Child Abuse

Serious, sustained child abuse isn't so much an issue when it comes to the topic of co-parenting. In those scenarios, typically the evidence is overwhelming and appropriate authorities have been notified and significant action taken. A serious child abuser in a post-divorce situation is easily discovered and dealt with.

However, there are circumstances where there child abuse is “under the radar.” It's not significant enough to warrant serious attention from the authorities, but it certainly gets your attention. A situation such as this can leave one a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness that is indescribable.

Those little bumps, bruises, and red marks aren't easily explained away. Emotional or mental abuse is even harder to deal with and prove. A child can feel fear of losing the offending parent or “getting in trouble” for “tattling” on the that parent. Such abuse can be sustained and never amount to enough for the normal parent to get addressed through official channels.

Co-parenting? Expecting a parent perpetrating these harms on children to cooperatively work on better parenting and disciplinary methods will likely forever remain an unrealized dream. There exists no approach by the normal parent that will change the ways of the abusive parent. From friendly suggestions to outright confrontation - it will be met with lies, denials, and very likely accusations that the normal parent is the one perpetrating the abuse. It's a situation that is insidious and not easily overcome.



Parental Alienation

The last topic for our list of reasons why co-parenting fails is parental alienation. It's increasingly becoming part of the public consciousness as news stories pop up regarding high-conflict custody cases where this problem exists. There is much debate and discussion about whether or not “Parental Alienation Syndrome” exists. Frankly, we don't care. Parental alienation exists and it's damaging.

What is parental alienation? Simply put, it's the effort of one parent to undermine or significantly impair the relationship between the children and the target parent. It can manifest itself in any one or more of the following forms:

- Speaking poorly of the target parent to or around the children. (Denigrating the target parent.)
- Access and/or Contact Blocking. (Custodial Interference.)
- False allegations against the target parent. (Physical or sexual abuse, neglect, etc.)
- Setting the target parent up to “fail” the children in any number of ways.

When the offending parent is an alienator, there is no co-parenting with them. Their hatred of their ex-partner is greater than any love that they possibly have for their children. Oftentimes, the children are the last “weapon” the offending parent has against the target parent. Marital assets have been distributed. The divorce has been granted. Custody orders and child support orders are in place. That leaves but one weapon in the arsenal of the high-conflict ex: the children.

In Closing

We've often wondered why the courts and all of the associated professionals only purport to consider the "best interests of the children." It escapes me why we're all not considering the "best interests of everyone" or the "best interests of the children, the father, and the mother." We believe everyone in the familial situation is deserving of consideration for their best interests and no one entity's best interests should trump another's entirely.

While our divorce and family court system currently doesn't operate with a sense of healing and the promotion of cooperation that would likely increase the positive outcomes for both parents and children, we can hope for change. We can protest, recommend, suggest, and demand some changes for the good of individual families and for society in general.

A case-management approach might be a sound consideration. Working with divorcing families much the same way that various organizations deal with drug abusers, alcohol abusers, even domestic abusers might be a good start. Approaching the situation with teamwork and guidance that promotes effective communication and cooperation must be a better system than a "win at all costs" approach centered around maximizing child support and fanning the flames of the adversarial system we now operate within.

It would nice be to see the system transform into one where all of the professionals focused on the post-divorce family, demanding cooperation between parents in the interests of the children. The consequences for a lack of cooperation would be to limit parenting time to an appropriate degree for the uncooperative, high-conflict parent. Judges, Parental Coordinators, Guardians Ad Litem, Custody Evaluators, Divorce Mediators could collaborate on individual cases to monitor the progress of the parents in developing a meaningful co-parenting arrangement rather than just passing them through the current family court meat-grinder in order to get to the next case.

It's hard to imagine such an approach would be more costly than the current child support enforcement, federal rebates for child support collections, divorce and family court costs, et al.

Resources

Now that you understand when and why co-parenting doesn't work, it's time to explore parenting options and techniques that will enable you to be an effective parent during your time with the children.

Parallel Parenting – A method of parenting that concentrates on what happens only in your household, while understanding that you have no or very limited control over what happens in the other parent's household

[Parallel Parenting – How it Evolves and Implementation](#)

Low Contact – An introduction on how to minimize contact and avoid unnecessary interaction with the other parent which can escalate into confrontations

[Appropriate Means of Contact with High-Conflict Personalities](#)

Message Boards – Get advice on how to respond to contact with your ex on our message boards, including parenting issues and how to implement Low or No Contact

[The Parenting Forums](#)

[The Low-Contact/No-Contact Forums](#)

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