

Step Away From The “C” Word!

The quickest way to start conflict between separated parents is to talk to them about *custody*. The mere mention of the word conjures up images of one parent winning the kids with the other parent losing.

Traditional thinking has it that custody must be specified, particularly when parents are in conflict and cannot resolve parenting decisions reasonably. This thinking only intensifies an already acrimonious situation. It bears mentioning that in the throws and newness of a separation, parents are at odds with each other and in the midst of the fear of losing their kids, they are apt to be in conflict. This however, does not necessarily mean they do not hold the same values or interests with regard to the care and development of their children. It also doesn't mean that they would not exercise reasonable judgment with regard to their children's needs. Teasing out the couple issues from the parent issues, there just may be reasonable ground to let both parents carry on with meaningful roles.

There is a way out of the quagmire for some parents in conflict to resolve parenting issues without the all or none consequences of awarding custody to one. In some situations they can both continue to feel equal in terms of being a parent, fully able to maintain their relationship and assert a meaningful role with their children. The process entails stepping away from the “C” word in favour of developing a *parenting plan*, discerning the *scope of authority* on specific issues, and specifying a means of *dispute resolution*.

Parents can be helped to determine their mutual interests and areas of agreement. Authority can be vested in one parent or the other for specific issues. Through the vesting of authority, each parent is assigned a span of control for the specific issue. Where parents cannot reach consensus, they can then agree on less expensive processes of dispute resolution such as mediation or arbitration through the services of a Parenting Coordinator. While parents may fear they will always be running back to mediation, this is rarely the case, particularly if there is a rule that the one who calls for mediation pays for the service, this to cut down on frivolous actions.

Essentially what needs to be determined is a set of rules for the management and care of the kids. To the degree this is achieved and in particular, out of court, the parents retain overall control of their lives. They remain free from the loss of control court imposed solutions may bring. Their conflict is in part reduced knowing both can have an ongoing and active role in parenting decisions even if some decisions are circumscribed.

As parents retain a meaningful role by agreeing to abide by their mutually established rules, responsibilities and span of authority, they can then ease into their separation with a growing sense of security that their attachments to the children will remain intact.

In the end, this is what both parents want post-separation. It is not just a say in the school they attend, but that each parent feels important and active in their children's life. This is in the children's interest. Even if one parent complains that the other never showed such interest before, the fact may be that they are now. An active and interested parent is good for any child whenever it comes. Step away from the “C” word and seek an agreement. Your kids will thank you for it.

Achieving this kind of parenting agreement can be difficult but difficult does not mean impossible. It requires a commitment from the parents and the support of a highly qualified support system. The support necessary may be found in a very experienced mediator or through lawyers practicing *Collaborative Law*. The [Parenting Plan Worksheet](#) can be a vital tool in the process of negotiating the agreement.

(The Parenting Plan Worksheet is available from this web page: www.yoursocialworker.com/sep-dev.htm)

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