

## INTERACTION CONSULTANTS

### Help for Child Contact Refusal Problems Between Separated Parents

It is not uncommon for me to receive brief to lengthy emails or messages describing a child's contact refusal between separated parents. The communication may come from the parent whose refusing to be seen by a child and the communication may come from the parent seeking to support a child in not seeing the other parent. In other words, I receive communications from parents on both sides of the problem.

In both cases the communication contains a one-sided account of the problem where blame is always ascribed to the other parent. The person sending me the communication is looking for advice on how to change or handle the other parent as the source of the problem. The communication is always convincing no matter which side and always contains information to demonstrate the veracity of any claim made against the other parent. The person is seeking support for their version of the problem.

Imagine receiving such communications from the parents of the same child. To read the communications one would have to believe they came from totally unrelated cases. Would either parent want me to send a supportive email advising on how to handle the matter to the other parent? Imagine how that would play out for the child and the conflict.

Child contact problems are always more complex than what can be conveyed in an email or Facebook message or post. These matters are always far more contentious than meets the eye.

The normal in these situations may include any number of serious factors such as a history of domestic violence; power imbalances; unresolved emotional issues such as affairs or intrusive in-laws; substance abuse (drug or alcohol) problems; mental illness; court, police and child protection involvement.

Child contact problems must also be viewed in the context of the child's developmental history, the current age and stage of the child's development and with a look at the child's exposure to the parental conflict as well as the details of the residential arrangement.

*Maddy was 3 years of age. She screamed during parental transfers. She would soil her diaper during transfer. One parent took this as evidence*

*of poor parenting by the other and sought to limit that parent's time with the child. It turns out they had agreed to week-about care of their daughter between them. The time between seeing each parent was to much for Maddy to bear and therefore emotionally stressful. It also turned out that the transfer took 5 to 15 minutes each time with the child exposed to their yelling and screaming. Once the residential arrangement was changed to a 2/2/3 pattern and transfers were between two neutral parties on behalf of the parents, the child's behavior settled down.*

*Jake was 6 years of age. He was now at an age where his version of truth was black and white – right or wrong. At his age it was difficult to appreciate that both parents would actually have acted poorly. He was constantly overhearing one set of grandparents talking about the child's other parent. The child took sides. After his parent (child of the grandparents) set a boundary limiting their intrusions, Jake settled back into seeing both parents.*

*Benson was 14 years of age. His parents never got a long. There was continuous fighting since their separation when he was 4 years of age. Now at 14 he simply wanted to spend most of his time with friends, away from having to hear the upset of either parent. However, because he lived mostly with the one parent and his friends were within that community, it meant he stopped seeing the other parent. The other parent took the change of contact as an outcome of the other parent's intrusion. They continued to fight in court forgetting that by this age, a court has even less control of a child than the parents. The parents fought and Benson really didn't see or listen to either of them. He got into drugs and eventually left school.*

In all three cases there were a number of the other intervening variables described above.

These situations from a social point of view are the level 3 and 4 cancers from the medical point of view. These situations often require intrusive and aggressive intervention to turn around and even then by the time there are such contact issues, the prognoses can be a disaster. Like wondering why you have lung cancer after 20 years of smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, many parents wonder how they got into these situation. The post -reflection often reveals similar tell-tale signs:

- Hard-ball litigating attorneys;

- Conflicts from the parents' family of origin or parental histories that include problems with their own parents such as alcohol, domestic violence and/or abuse.
- Unremitting parental conflict often over parenting styles;
- Unresolved emotional injuries from the relationship the result of domestic violence and/or infidelity;
- At least one parent with a substance abuse issue;
- At least one parent with a mental health issue, most often of a personality disorder type.

If you want to lower the risk of child contact problems and the ravages of a high conflict separation or if you are already in this situation, then consider the following;

1. If using a lawyer do not seek the hard-ball litigator with the reputation of a bit bull. Look for the lawyer with the reputation of getting along with others and resolving matters peacefully. These are often lawyers trained in Collaborative Law and/or mediation. Beating the other up through the legal system rarely results in peace and even if a court order is issued, the animosity that results will still undo the intended outcome;
2. If you recognize yourself to have a substance abuse issue or if someone tells you they think you have a substance abuse issue, then abstain from using the substance. The moment you defend your right to imbibe, you are actually demonstrating that a substance has more value than your relationship with your child. That is already a problem whether or not you use to get intoxicated. Always chose the child over the substance. Take the issue off the table completely. Only abstinence can do that.
3. Mental illness itself isn't the issue. The issue is unmanaged emotions, all or none thinking and extreme behavior. Learn to manage your own emotions, thinking and behavior. Using the behavior of the other as an excuse for your own can only carry you so far. At some point your own unmanaged emotions and behavior will be a factor of your child's experience of you and your influence upon your child as a role model. How do you know if you have unmanaged emotions or behavior? You know when you find yourself using substances to survive; when you find yourself yelling or screaming (at anyone); when you find yourself taking about your situation with

your children either right next to you or even just in the home let alone telling them bad things directly about the other parent or allowing others do do so almost on your behalf; when you find yourself engaging in out-of-control behavior or behavior that can be regarded as criminal; or when you feel like you can't cope and are reaching out for help, but in a manner that only serves to blame the other parent. (Even if the other parent is to blame, the issue is your coping.)

So when you get in touch with me asking for quick advice and I indicate that under the request are often complex issues, please forgive me.

In the interest of your children and to honor your request, these situations require far more information than can ever be conveyed in a text message or email and no matter how awful the other persons is said to be, real progress still most often starts by examining oneself and managing oneself in the situation.

Best case scenario is that both parents seek help to understand their own contributions to distress and how they intertwine and how to improve that dynamic. Second best case scenario is that at least one parent seeks to examine their own contribution to distress and manage themselves as best as possible. Worst case scenario is that both parents get locked into blaming the other.

I hope this make sense and is actually helpful.

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