

Parenting High Conflict Divorce: Mediating Parenting Plans

Meeting with couples engaged in high conflict divorces immediately thrust each other into an eye-for-an-eye battle. When you are in high conflict you will communicate with scripted monologues that presuppose both the opening statements and replies of the other. Each of you is constantly looking to redress the perceived imbalance of past wrongs and, with each reinforcement, you will heap more injustice on each other which will add to your mutual discontent. Both members of such a conflict have secret code words and looks that are incendiary causing the other to ignite without our perceiving the trigger.

If you are one of these high conflict divorce ex-couples you impasse has less to do with negotiating financial and parenting plans and all the more to do with getting even. Each has an imagined value for the pain and suffering experienced in the marriage and look to the divorce to settle the score. You have lost sight of the best interests of the children even while using this catch phrase to couch their positions.

We ask high conflict divorced parents to enter mediation in good faith that there is a way you can come to a joint agreement that will work for your child(ren) and for both of the divorced parents. You may choose to enter mediation to avoid the high cost of the contested battle and to find a way to learn how to overcome the belief that the other parent is impossible. I will not permit mediation to be just another ploy in the battle to prove who is worse.

But what of the children in high conflict divorce situations? The mediator cannot remain neutral with regard to the best interest of the children. High conflict divorce mediation requires the mediator to make clear this position. I inform the parents that I will advocate on behalf of the children such that their needs can best be met by agreement with both parents. As your mediator I will be commenting on parental behavior and its impact on the well being of your children. My objective is to develop a parenting plan that will work for both parents and the children. I will also inform, if not educate, the parents on their destructive behavior to the social-emotional development of their children while respecting the right for both parents to have meaningful relationships with their children. As mediator I do not hold any rescue fantasies and I accept that the marriage is over. I, as mediator, accept the foibles of the parents and as such only seek to instill compensatory strategies, teaching or structuring ways to mitigate anger and the exchange of parental information when necessary. The process also will not avoid issues raised by the parties, particularly when issues of drugs, alcohol, abuse or inappropriate discipline or care are disclosed. Rather, as the mediator I will bring issues to the foreground to be addressed as part of the parenting plan. While each complains of the parenting of the other, it may be that both should attend selective parenting courses and that this be written into the parenting plan agreement.

As your mediator I will mediate a workable parenting plan. This may include entering into a high conflict situation. At all time I shall keep the focus on the children; accept that the parents won't likely change with regard to each other; provide strategies to keep both parents meaningfully involved with the children; and address harmful issues.

The process requires an active and seasoned mediator with knowledge and training on child development. I have been practicing for almost 50 years in family counselling and mediation. A defining variable in choosing a mediator is finding one who is able to handle the intensity of high conflict and offers a structured approach to the mediation process itself.

If you know someone with confusion about how the parenting of their children is NOT working out after a separation/divorce, tell them you know a family counsellor and family mediator who has over 46 years experience and will be helpful for them to consult. Give them my card and ask if you can have me give them a call.

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