

## **How to resolve disputes before they get out of control**

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Some people say that the greatest human tragedy that we sustain is the death of a close family member. Yes, it is certainly true that losing a loved one causes significant pain and grief. But, other than the death of a child, which can never have a logical explanation, divorce and custody battles may cause a greater and longer lasting loss than any other human tragedy.

Moms, dads, grandparents, and kids who find their family embroiled in divorce and legal separation cases are going through a living death. Theirs is the death of a relationship. Moms and dads often feel that they have been betrayed or disappointed by their soon to be former spouse. They act out or react to the hurts they experience. People going through this emotional roller coaster will find that they act emotionally and not logically. This will often lead to actions that are designed to hurt rather than help the family unit which is usually already in dysfunction.

Kids and grandparents find that they are almost like victims of a “drive by shooting.” They may not see it coming, but certainly feel the effect of the result of the behavior.

When we lose a close friend or family member we mourn and remember lessons they have taught us and the life experiences we have shared. We then go on, holding their memories with us wherever we go. But, adults who go through divorce find that they want to forget the memories of the past and move on to a new life. It is sometimes too painful to think about the past. But, when parents divorce and they have children, they have a greater responsibility, which does not allow them the luxury of completely

moving on. They must be able to talk and communicate with each other now and into the future. Parents will find that they are no longer marriage partners, but they will always be parent partners with their former spouse. Unfortunately, the desire to “move on” and forget the past often results in custodial parents wanting little or nothing to do with their former spouse or their former spouse’s family. Some parents may not even get along with their own family. The result of these feelings is to attempt to ignore their children’s extended family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and sometimes even step siblings. Just like the victim of the “drive by shooting” the children have nothing to do with the action, but suffer the loss of the result.

This reality has caused lawsuits and court cases to be filed to try and stop the amputation of close family members of children by their custodial parents. These types of cases include denial of visitation or parenting time for non-custodial moms or dads, or grandparents who have been told that they can no longer see their grandchildren. This litigation is very expensive, both financially and emotionally, for the family. So, how can we help to resolve some of these disputes before they get so out of hand that lawyers and the court system need to become involved?

First, attempt to diffuse problems between family members before consulting an attorney to file a legal action. This can be done through telephone or written communication between the family members involved. Face to face meetings are also very helpful. Confrontational and accusatory statements should be avoided by all of the adults.

Second, respect each other’s right to think and feel in their own way. Do not think that you are going to change the other person’s beliefs. Recognize that a person may have

feelings that you may not understand or agree with, but, acknowledge their feelings and let them know that you understand how they feel. You may even want to come to an understanding that you may never always agree, but that you can resolve your dispute by agreeing to disagree.

Third, try to find a common thread that you have with the other. Often time this recognition may be the reality that you both have the love for and of the child or grandchild. It is imperative to remember that the best interests of the child, not necessarily the interests of the adults, should control. This will require adults to sometimes put themselves second to the needs of their children/grandchildren.

Fourth, the use of behavioral science specialists (i.e. social workers, psychologists, and sometimes even psychiatrists) may be suggested as neutral moderators of meetings between the adults to attempt to talk-out and resolve family problems that brought about the break-up between family members. Resolution, possible through these efforts, may help reunite families in dysfunction or at least avoid battles that scare everyone.

Fifth, try and think what it must feel like to be the opposite party in your dispute. If you are a custodial parent, how do you think your former spouse must feel when they are separated from their child(ren)? Or if you are not allowing your children to see or visit with their grandparents, what pain do you think that loss must feel like to them? What if it all was reversed and you were the one denied?

How children come through divorce and separation of their parents is measured by how the important adults in their life handle this deeply difficult and emotional time. Remember, children learn from not only what we tell them, but also from what they see.