



Protecting children from adult conflict

One of the most anxiety-provoking events for children is when their parents fight. Hearing or seeing parents in conflict threatens the most fundamental aspect of a child's survival instinct. After all, parents are meant to ensure that everyone is safe. Let's be clear – we're not talking about everyday disagreements that are resolved fairly speedily and satisfactorily. In fact, it's good training for children to see that people can have a disagreement, and yet work it out so that tension and unhappiness dissolve. In this way, they learn that having an argument doesn't mean that you stop loving or don't love the other person; that it's normal to disagree about some things and still have happy lives; and they learn the skills necessary to deal effectively with conflict as they are growing up. However, when children are exposed to parents' ongoing criticism, name-calling, accusations, put-downs, sarcasm, blaming, shouting, and any of the other aspects of physical or emotional violence (including intimidation, breaking things, ignoring protests, controlling finances or social activity, denying a part in the conflict), their anxiety levels increase to the point that they become chronically stressed. And chronic stress leads to all sorts of problems like vomiting and headaches, anxiety, depression, distractibility, and irritability. Children and adolescents who are chronically stressed struggle to achieve their potential at school or maintain satisfying friendships. They can become withdrawn and miserable and even become at risk of self harm or suicidality.

Exposure to anger-based conflict between parents increases the likelihood that children themselves will exhibit high levels of aggressive behaviours in various interpersonal relationships (for example with their peers, teachers or parents). In fact, a large body of research demonstrates that conflict between parents is associated with an increased risk for psychological problems among children in all families, whether the parents are together or apart. In our work with the Family Court, where the care of children is being disputed between parents or other caregivers, we see a lot of anxious children who are caught in the middle of intense conflict between the adults who are meant to be taking care of them. This conflict is usually born of longstanding relationship problems or other adult issues. Children will go to extraordinary lengths to try and stop the conflict – they may lie to the first parent about the second parent if they think this will make the first parent happier (and vice versa); they will behave badly simply to interrupt the parents' battle, and would rather be getting into trouble from the parents than have the parents fighting with each other; they will withdraw from one or other of the parents in an attempt to avoid the distress of the anxiety caused by the conflict; they may behave very strangely in order to draw the parents' attention away from each other; and they may try and keep everyone happy by being incredibly obedient and compliant (which isn't normal all the time!).

So, I have developed Ten Commandments designed to protect children from adult conflict both within intact families and families that are separated. All of these rules are designed to protect children from the adult conflict that children are helpless to change, makes them fearful, and interferes with their development:

1. You will both recognize the child's right to a positive relationship with both parents, and so will not badmouth the other parent in the child's hearing. Nor will you make remarks or facial expressions that are designed to send a message that the other

- parent is not a worthwhile person. If you have been left by your partner, you will recognize that your partner wants out of the relationship with you – not the relationship with the children.
2. You will not become so wrapped up in your own misery that you neglect the child's care. So you will not leave the child with others often while you go out to try and have a good time to distract you from your pain; you will pay attention to the child's grief at the losses involved in separation; and you will ensure that you maintain routines that are familiar to the child. Equally, you will maintain good health practices and support systems for yourself so that you can be the best parent you want to be.
 3. You will both recognize that the child has a right to be protected from adult attitudes or behaviors, and so will not talk about your own or your partner's sexual behavior or any antisocial behavior in the child's hearing.
 4. You will not complain to the child about financial arrangements between yourselves, and you will not try and use money or material goods to "win over" the child or make up for emotional neglect.
 5. You will keep the child informed of decisions that affect him or her. Therefore, you will not suddenly leave the family home one day (unless there are issues of safety involved) without explaining to the child that you are going to separate from the other parent and how the visitation is going to work. You will both reassure the child that you will do your best to support the child's relationship with the other parent, and you will always be committed to your own relationship with the child. If you decide to re-partner, the child has a right to know in advance and be told exactly how this will affect him or her.
 6. You will not try and share your distress with your child – please remember who the parent is in this relationship – so you will talk to other adults about your rage or distress, not the child. A child has other life tasks to deal with rather than being your friend or confidante.
 7. You will maintain good limits and boundaries around the children's behavior – just because the adults are in conflict doesn't mean that all expectations of appropriate behavior should be abandoned. Just because you don't see the children all the time doesn't mean that you should be "softer" than the parent with whom they spend most of their time. Equally, just because you have the care of the children the majority of the time doesn't mean that you can become "stricter" as you struggle with your rage.
 8. You will not use a child to send messages to the other parent or to spy on the other parent, and will not ask questions about the other parents' activities or relationships.
 9. You will make sure that the handover times, when a child is delivered from one parent to the other, are conflict-free and if that is impossible, you will find a more neutral way for these handovers to occur.
 10. You will remember that, in New Zealand anyway, the Care of Children Act 2004 is founded on the premise that parents do not have rights over their children, they have a responsibility to act in their child's best interests. A child's best interests include having positive and ongoing relationships with both parents. Therefore, a primary responsibility of each parent is to do whatever they can to promote a positive relationship with the other parent. In order to do so you have to find a way to consult and co-operate with each other – whatever that takes.

There you have it – if you stick to these ten rules, you will minimize the harm done to your children by the conflict between yourselves as parents.



