

Family Law Update: Four Tips for Addressing Co-Parenting Challenges in Today's "New Normal"

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Co-parenting children in divorced households presents difficulties in the best of circumstances. Add to these challenges the stress and potential risks arising from the spread of COVID-19 and you have the perfect recipe for additional relationship tension and discord.

During this difficult time, it is imperative that divorced parents do everything in their power to create an environment conducive to healthy, effective communication that serves their children's best interests and paves the way for fair and productive co-parenting decision-making.

Going to court is not always the best solution, especially under the current circumstances with courts operating with limited abilities. Parents should seek to avoid arguments and work to develop methods of communication that will facilitate their ability to jointly address and resolve whatever disagreements may arise. The following tips may be helpful:

1. **Create an Atmosphere for Effective Communication:** The most important step to take, especially during in these trying times, is to establish a mode of communication that will facilitate partnership and conflict resolution. If verbal communication works best, for example, create a procedure for discussing child-related issues, such as establishing a set time/day for all communications, a mutual exchange of issues to be discussed, and a system for memorializing what was discussed and agreed upon. If texting or emails work best, develop protocols for addressing/responding to issues that avoid personal attacks or accusations, but instead focus on the issues and their responses. Creating a safe environment for the exchange of thoughts will open the door to conflict resolution.

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2. **Seek Common Practices Based on Agreed Upon Information:** With travel restrictions and other precautions still advisable, co-parenting in two separate homes requires a commonality of practice and concept. Consistency in rules and practices regarding social distancing, travel outside of the home, and acceptable activities will foster comfort and ease for the children. When differences of opinion arise, relying on governmental guidance is often helpful. If disagreements arise as to what is safe or practical, establish common sources for seeking out information to establish an independent basis for conflict resolution. There is a plethora of both government and private resources addressing COVID-19 information and guidelines.
3. **Keep Each Other Informed:** We are all living through unprecedented times, when the familiar norms of behavior have been altered. Our children's usual activities have been curtailed, their educational experiences have been altered, and their daily routines have been disrupted. It is important to keep each other apprised of the children's new norms, providing the other parent with details regarding their emotional wellbeing, activities, and day-to-day routines. This open communication will allow for an easier transition between the two households, thereby creating a more secure environment for the children.
4. **Focus on the Needs of the Children:** The disruptions to our children's lives have presented challenges and obstacles that are unique to every child. With school closures, parents working from home, limited social contact with family and friends, and other changes in our behaviors, parenting time schedules may be affected, requiring a modification of a parenting schedule. Work together to formulate a schedule that serves the children's best interests. If parenting time must be curtailed, seek alternative ways to allow the children to spend time with both parents. With social media, teleconferencing, and other forms of electronic communication, parents can maintain their interactions with children when face-to-face contact is not viable.

In times of uncertainty, children need stability and they turn to their parents to meet this need. It is incumbent upon parents to respond appropriately. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recognized this concern in their publication **Stress and Coping**, noting specifically that "children and teens" are in a group that "may respond more strongly to the stress created by COVID-19."

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