

## **Avoiding the Minefield: Upping Your Parenting Game After Divorce**

If you are a parent finding yourself feeling estranged and alienated from your child, then you are quite possibly already in the minefield of parenting after divorce.

There is never a trickier time to parent a child than when you feel you are being alienated. Every choice you make as a parent is examined under a microscope by not only your child, but the other parent as well. They're just looking for ways that you are failing, and that is exactly why you need to be at the top of your parenting game!

I know many clients I talk to feel they don't have the energy to focus on parenting, and this is often the last thing on their minds when dealing with high conflict divorces. However, learning some specific parenting skills and strategies will help you avoid the minefield you are walking in, and possibly deescalate future conflicts with your child.

### ***Using Empathy***

First and foremost, you need to learn to be the most patient and empathetic parent you can possibly be. This is very difficult task when you are faced with an angry, disrespectful, entitled child who often feels they are more in control of the situation than you are. However, if you lose your temper and find yourself getting angry and frustrated, then all the attention gets focused on your behavior, and not that of your child. Suddenly this conflict will become all about how you are treating the child, and not about how the child is acting out. This will inevitably be reported back to the favored parent and used against you, quite possibly in a court of Law!

This is when you must **STOP** and use some of your best parenting skills. When a child is very upset, you need to remember that they are primed for the fight or flight response in their brain. They are being flooded with cortisol, making it impossible for them to take in any suggestions and discipline you want to administer in that moment. The **ONLY WAY** to help them calm down and refocus back on themselves is to start with **EMPATHY**.

Statements such as:

- ***"I can see you are very upset right now so I will just sit here quietly with you."***  
(NOT- "*Stop being disrespectful and rude to me. I am your father, and you won't treat me that way*")
- ***"You're really frustrated with me right now, aren't you? Can you tell me more about why you're upset?"***  
(NOT- "*Don't talk to me that way. I'm taking your phone.*")
- ***"I'm ready to listen whenever you feel calmer."***  
(NOT- "*You will treat me with respect and do what I say. I am your mother.*")

Empathy was not something most of our parents excelled at, as parenting styles during our childhood were very different. Consequently, many of us did not learn these skills in our own family of origin. However, this is a skill that can be learned, and there are many good books that can help such as, Mindsight or Whole Brain- Child by Dan Siegel.

## Telling A Child What YOU Will Do

As second important skill is “**Never tell a child what to do!**”. Tell them what YOU will do. This strategy helps avoid many conflicts, as these children are particularly sensitive to being told what to do, and often they respond to a very authoritarian parenting approach by becoming more disrespectful and verbally aggressive. A Drill Sergeant, Authoritarian approach to parenting, which was a common parenting style used by our parents, will most certainly backfire in a child starting to be alienated or estranged from a parent. Ultimately, we only have control over our OWN behavior. Often parents mistakenly believe they should be able to control their child’s behavior, and this is another step in the minefield you do not want to take. Rather they need to focus on their own behavior and begin parenting with the awareness of how they can interact differently with their child. Phrases such as:

- ***“I will be happy to discuss this with you as soon as your voice is calm.”***  
(NOT- “Stop yelling at me. You will do what I say when you are at my house.”)
- ***“I will be glad to take you to your friends as soon as you clean your room and help with the dishes.”***  
(NOT- “I’m not taking you to your friends because this is the third time, I’ve asked you to clean your room and you don’t seem to respect the rules at my house.”)
- ***“I would be happy to give you some computer time as soon as your homework is done. If you need any help let me know.”***  
(NOT- “That’s it for screen time! You won’t be using your computer today because you didn’t finish your homework when I told you to.”)

This is a common strategy used by Love & Logic. I teach Love & logic skills to my parents regularly in my practice. Check out their website at [www.Loveandlogic.com](http://www.Loveandlogic.com). They have great ideas for parents wanting to learn new parenting strategies and many books, my favorite being, “When A Child Leaves You Speechless”.

The way you interact with your children, and the tone of voice and body language you use when they are angry or frustrated is crucially important in these moments of high intensity, particularly if you are dealing with a child who is being slowly alienated from

their parent. Learning these skills can take your parenting to another level and help prevent the disconnection you are fearful of if you keep stepping on land minds. Take the time to educate yourself and stay in control of your own behavior. This may be one of the most important steps you take in keeping a close relationship with your child through a high conflict divorce or custody battle.