

Parenting After Separation: When Children Resist Contact with a Parent

In my experience as a child specialist, one of the most difficult challenges facing separated parents is when their child or children resist contact with one of the parents. Whether or not a parenting plan has been established, children can register their protest in any number of ways, often perplexing parents with how to appropriately address the situation. In a contentious separation, it is easy for parents to jump to conclusions: the favored parent may assume that the rejected parent is doing something wrong, while the rejected parent may assume that the favored parent is manipulating the children to resist contact with them. Even in cooperative separations, there can be disagreements about the meaning of the child's behavior. For example, one parent may believe the problem is one of transitioning between households, whereas the other may believe it has to do with the comforts of one home over another. The children themselves may be giving parents different explanations, or in the most difficult situations, not communicating with the rejected parent at all. Regardless of the theories put forward, it is important for parents to keep an open mind in exploring the situation.

Having said this, it's not easy to stay open, especially when emotions such as fear and anger are present. The rejected parent may be fearful that they will lose their attachment with their child, and angry at the other parent for not doing enough to help. They may make the situation worse by blaming the child, making the child feel guilty, or rejecting the child outright in a momentary outburst. Meanwhile, the favored parent is dealing with their own fears. For example, will they damage their relationship with their child if they don't do what their children want? They may be frustrated at the perception that it is up to them to enforce the agreement, or at having to deal with their child's acting-out behavior when they try. It would go a long way to ease the situation if parents could remember that whatever fears and frustrations they have, the other parent has their version of the same emotions. Mutual empathy at the beginning enables parents to relax somewhat, which in turn sets the stage for examining the issues together and each taking responsibility for problem-solving.

Of course, there are situations in which children are alienated from a parent, an active process of child emotional abuse that has distinctive characteristics that are beyond the scope of this article. I mention it only because it is often one of the first explanations to be put forward by a rejected parent, or, if not by the parent, by perhaps an extended family member, a friend, or even a misguided professional (lawyer, counsellor) who does not have the whole picture. It is more accurate to say that parent-child contact problems are not uncommon in separated families, vary in degree, can emerge at any time, and certainly can involve a multitude of factors that should be considered.

If we can look at a child's resistance to contact with a parent as a response to potentially a whole set of circumstances, we broaden our understanding. These are some of the factors we look at in gaining some clarity on the situation.

- The child's age; cognitive capacity and temperament; the quality of their attachment to each parent; whether the child has more of an affinity with one parent than another in terms of personality or interests, and what the child is working on developmentally at that point in time. A preschooler will have different developmental needs than a school-age child, as will an adolescent. Every child is unique and will have their particular preferences, needs and experiences of attachment and security.
- The circumstances of the separation, such as whether it involved betrayal, humiliation or intense conflict; the degree to which children felt aligned with one parent because of it; the child's own perception of the marital breakdown (remembering that children, too, make meaning of what they experience), and whether the child experienced any personal wounds in their interactions with a parent that haven't been addressed, either pre-or post-separation.

It takes a great deal of humility, courage and openness to emotional growth on the part of parents to effectively work through a separation, just within themselves, let alone how it's impacted their relationships with their children. Yet if children are going to grow up stronger and healthier with greater immunity to the risk factors facing children of high conflict divorce, parents must undertake this journey wholeheartedly. Emotional avoidance (by which I mean not identifying, owning, accepting and appropriately expressing feelings for whatever reason) is the root of many mental health issues affecting children, teens and adults alike, and it begins in families, intact or otherwise. Separation, like other family crises, can be the beginning of learning to face emotions together and learn healthier ways of relating to them so they enrich rather than undermine our choices, our lives and our relationships.

When this doesn't happen, parent-child contact problems can be the child's way of avoiding emotional pain by avoiding the situations that the child associates with that pain, such as conflict-ridden transitions, the inappropriate expression of strong emotions by a parent such as anger or anxiety, or by a sense that a parent is not emotionally available when they're with them. A child may also have been deeply impacted by a parent's behavior in a situation and taken it personally. If such a wound exists, the child may begin to withdraw and may not even realize it. In other words, while some children may be quite aware of their hurts and frustration, others are less so but still unconsciously retreat. It's not easy for children to openly express their pain to a parent who has hurt their feelings, particularly if they don't feel permission to do so. Parents must take the lead in creating the trust necessary to talk about it.

- Parenting styles and communication strengths and limitations in building strong parent-child relationships. A major part of this involves the capacity for empathy toward the child, in creating emotional safety and the sense that their needs will be seen and addressed.

- Family relationships including siblings and grandparents. For example, sibling relationships and perceptions of favoritism may be influencing the child's resistance. Or a child may feel uncomfortable with grandparents who constantly criticize their estranged in-law - that is, the child's other parent - to whom the child is attached but is not allowed to defend.
- Family changes may also be involved, such as the remarriage of a parent, or blended family challenges. A child may not be avoiding contact with their parent at all, but with their parent's spouse or partner. Or they may not enjoy their new family circumstances and may be feeling unduly stressed by trying to adapt to them.

Every situation is unique, yet one thing seems universal, and that is that a child's repeated resistance should be taken seriously and addressed in a timely and cooperative manner. Seek professional help earlier rather than later if attempts to resolve the situation are not working. It is particularly important that children have a neutral person to speak with, preferably a counsellor trained in helping separated families and who know how to deliver feedback that furthers reconciliation if possible. In my own practice, I begin with the value of connection, of children having a positive relationship with both parents, and of repairing, restoring, healing and building those relationships wherever there is a sincere willingness to do so. The willingness may be obscured by the pain sometimes for all involved, but once that pain is acknowledged, the need for that parent-child bond becomes apparent.

One of the major benefits of a collaborative separation is that it offers families a team approach, whose support can continue beyond the achievement of a separation agreement. Child specialists are there to assist throughout the changes children and families go through, and divorce coaches are there to support parents to make the changes they need to make to restore effective family functioning. In short, parent-child contact problems present as a crisis, but give parents an opportunity to forge healthier bonds with their children.

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Summary: 5 Tips for Parents

1. Be willing to engage with emotions in yourself, and in your family, and get the support you need to be able to do that effectively.

2. Educate yourself: Read up on child and teen development and take parenting and communication courses. Find the resources in your community and also online that fit for you (see our website under resources.)
3. Take parent –child contact problems seriously and talk with your ex about your observations with curiosity. Is this simply your child not wanting to end an activity at times to go to the other parent, or is it more pervasive?
4. Put yourself in your child's shoes, as well as the other parent's shoes, to understand their experience better. Check out any assumptions you're making by asking open, curious questions. Elicit cooperation toward improving things through your own willingness to participate in resolution of concerns.
5. Be willing to get professional help if your efforts to problem-solve together don't seem to be working. In seeking help, keep an open mind and resolve to focus on the big picture of stronger, healthier relationships, rather than on maintaining a percentage of parenting time or a previously held parenting schedule. Parenting plans change and grow as children change and grow, and indeed they often must if children's needs are to be truly respected.