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## **Ask the Expert: Tips for Professionals Helping Parents Protect Their Children from the Negative Effects of Conflict**

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Interparental conflict is arguably the most impactful risk factor for poor child outcomes following divorce. It increases children's risk for a wide range of problems including mental health problems and disorders, substance use, high-risk sexual behavior, and academic problems. Helping parents reduce interparental conflict is one of the most stressful and difficult, but important, challenges for helping professionals. If you are engaged in this work, these tips are for you.

1. **Working on reducing interparental conflict is hard work.** Remind yourself often why you do this work. We all know that continuing conflict between parents following a divorce or separation is one of the primary risk factors for children's short-term distress and long-term mental health problems. The science is really clear on this point. What people are probably less aware of is that there is also evidence that continuing conflict takes a toll on a child's relationship with both parents! Both during the process of divorce and years later, children are often angry with their parents about getting them involved in the conflict. We also know that there are lots of reasons why parents keep the conflict going, such as personality disorders and strong emotions of hurt, anger, and hate. Very powerful stuff. So, it is not easy to stop the fighting. It takes a lot of work for them and you. This isn't news to you but reminding yourself of why you do this work can help to keep you going.
2. **There are things you can do to help – teach evidence-based skills to reduce conflict to protect children.** Although you can't undo the hurt or anger there are effective strategies you can teach parents who are caught up in conflict. Over the last few years, new evidence has come from two randomized trials of programs for divorced parents indicating success in reducing interparental conflict (Dads for Life; Online New

Beginnings Program). These are the first reports from randomized trials that provide scientific evidence of such effects. Across these two studies, reduced conflict was reported by fathers, mothers, and children. Why did these programs succeed? Both programs took a similar approach. They didn't try to change parents' personalities or take away the hurt or anger. Instead, they taught skills parents could use to protect their children from witnessing conflict and to reduce the overall level of conflict. This *Ask the Expert* column describes some of the skills and strategies that are taught in these evidence-based programs.

3. **Explore the parents' intent.** This is probably the most critical step. Help parents take stock of the outcomes they want to achieve. Do they want to get back at the other parent, defend themselves, or simply let their children know the "truth" about the other parent? Their desire to do any of these things is fully understandable and may come from strong emotions that are hard to resist acting on. But parents need to know that there is a big cost to putting their children in the middle. Awareness of the cost to their children is probably the most powerful counter to motivations to continue the conflict. One of the programs that has demonstrated success describes mobilizing parents to take a "protective stand" as a way to make a commitment to protect your children from conflict. Often parent goals such as "winning an argument" are incompatible with protecting their children.
4. **Strengthen parents' awareness of their power to choose actions.** The most common reason parents give for behaviors that continue or escalate the conflict is some version of "It's not my fault? I'm not the one who starts it! He/She is the one!" Whatever version of this song that is sung, the implication is the same. "Don't look at me...there's nothing I can do." Powerlessness is used as an excuse for inaction. But – once you have helped parents commit to taking a protective stand, you can help them become aware of what they can do, what choices they have, what is within their power. You can also educate parents about behaviors that may inadvertently increase conflict or put children in the middle. Most obviously, this includes badmouthing, arguing in front of the children either in person or on the phone, or sharing "the truth." Also, a parent's reactions to the other parent who is initiating conflict can either increase or decrease their children's exposure to conflict. Educating parents about more subtle behaviors that put children in the middle is also important, such as sending messages to the other parent through the child or allowing badmouthing of the other parent by extended family or family friends.
5. **Help parents translate intent into action.** Intent is not enough. Parents can anticipate when conflict situations are likely to come up and plan ahead for how they will handle them. Although conflict interactions may seem spontaneous, they often can be anticipated, such as the exchanges from one household to the other or discussions of hot topics involving money or parenting time. Parents can reduce these "high-risk" situations

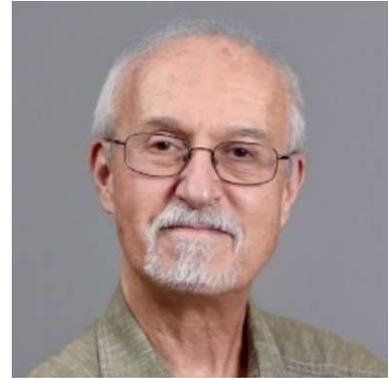
using specific tools to identify the high-risk situation and sit down in advance to make a plan on how to reduce these high-risk situations. Sometime parents can be helped to jointly create such plans. In addition, parents can plan what they are going to do individually before the situation, during the situation to avoid conflict and to congratulate themselves afterwards for helping to avoid or decrease the conflict.

6. **Help parents prepare for anticipated conflict.** One element of the plan is what parents say to themselves to prepare for how they will protect their children if the other parent instigates conflict. This includes acknowledging that this may be a situation in which conflict arises, recognizing that their children are at risk for being exposed, and repeating their commitment to take a protective stand to keep their children out of it. Just repeating to themselves that they are not going to “take the bait” of provocations that may occur can help a lot. As the situation approaches, they can remind themselves of this goal and what they plan to do to keep their children out of the middle.
7. **Help parents plan their behaviors during and after the conflict to protect their children and themselves.** If the parent’s anticipation comes to pass and an argument ensues with the children present, the second part of the parent’s plan kicks in. First, physically usher the children away from the situation if possible. Then, don’t do things that may escalate the situation, like arguing back. Instead, acknowledge the disagreement and ask the other parent to pick a time when the children will not be around to talk about the disagreement and try to reach a way forward. Then, after the situation has passed, if they have avoided having their children exposed to the conflict, the parent should give themselves a verbal “pat on the back” for taking their protective stand. They need this kind of reinforcement because what they did is not easy. If things didn’t go well – it’s not helpful for parents to beat themselves up. It is more helpful to acknowledge the problem, reaffirm their commitment to protect their children from conflict, and to revise their plan on how to do so the next time. This isn’t easy.
8. **Help parents realize that the first step to reduce conflict is not to do things that make it worse.** Conflict between divorced and separated parents can be destructive even when it occurs with no children around. It can sap a parent’s energy, lead to depression and carry over to interactions in front of the children. A critical place to start reducing the level of conflict is to inhibit doing things that turn up the heat, things that make it worse. It is understandable that a parent may want to strike back, win the argument, prove they are right, or have the last word. These inclinations may lead parents to say something sarcastic, critical, or defensive, or even physically strike out. Parents can also withdraw from the situation by simply ignoring what the other parent said or nonverbally dismissing it...”whatever.” These behaviors will definitely lead to a cycle of escalating

recrimination and conflict. Parents can catch themselves from doing things that make the conflict worse and remind themselves that they are not going to “take the bait.”

9. **Help parents realize that they can do things to de-escalate the situation.** Once a parent has inhibited their urge to do things that turn up the heat, they are able to engage in the hardest part of all...showing respect for their child's other parent. It is critical for parents to show respect, even if they don't actually feel respect. This may be hard to do because of the intense feelings involved, but actually, people show respect for others they don't particularly like all the time. They do it at work in interactions with customers or supervisors or co-workers that they don't actually like. They do it in the service of their larger goal – in this case, preventing the conflict from getting out of control and protecting their child's psychological health. Acknowledging the other parent's view doesn't mean agreeing with it. It is a step toward figuring out how to respond to it in a way that keeps the conflict from getting out of control. It can involve behaviors like acknowledging the disagreement and asserting a commitment to work it out. It may mean picking a time to discuss when the situation is less heated and keeping it. It may mean using tools such as digital communication that reduces the chance for escalating conflict.
10. **Help parents find support for dealing with their feelings.** The strategies we've described are not easy to do and take practice. Teaching parents to use these strategies can be helpful. But they are not designed to help parents deal with the intense feelings of hurt or anger that often drive conflict. For that, parents need another outlet. Talking with a close friend or spiritual leader who cares about them, who does not share the same level of negative emotion about the other parent, and who does shares their goal of reducing conflict can be helpful. Talking to a professional counselor might be a good option for some parents.
11. **Help yourself by finding support for what you do.** Working with parents in high-conflict divorces can take its toll. It can lead to vicarious trauma of the professional. Remember to develop ways to take care of yourself such as having colleagues you can talk with to share your high and low points as you do this work. Remember that you can't help others if you aren't helping yourself.

**Irwin Sandler, PhD**, has published major reviews of the literature on parent education programs in the family courts and in other settings. He has been a member of the working group of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine that produced a landmark review of preventive interventions for children and adolescents and has been a co-author on a paper describing standards of evidence for preventive interventions. He is the co-developer and evaluator of the New Beginnings Program that has published multiple studies demonstrating long-term benefits for children following divorce.



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**Sharlene Wolchik** is a Professor of Psychology and Director of the Research and Education Advancing Children's Health Institute at Arizona State University. Her research has focused primarily on parents' role in promoting children's healthy adaptation to divorce. She co-developed, along with Dr. Sandler, the New Beginnings Program, a parenting-after-divorce program and evaluated it in three randomized controlled trials. The trials showed program effects in multiple domains of functioning, with program effects lasting up to 15 years after participation. She and Dr. Sandler recently evaluated a web-based version of this program and found very positive effects. She was awarded the Stanley Cohen Award for Research from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.

**Dr. David Weinstock** received his Ph.D. from the University of Arizona and his J.D. from the Boston University School of Law. He is a licensed psychologist in Arizona and a licensed and retired attorney in New York and Massachusetts. His focus is in family law, specifically family evaluations and family and individual counseling. He has conducted family law evaluations for over two decades, both privately and at the Pima County Conciliation Court. He has also provided treatment to adolescents, including experience working with the gifted population. Dr. Weinstock has experience working within the criminal justice system, which includes training at the Arizona State Hospital, conducting competency evaluations and risk assessments. Dr. Weinstock has experience with sexual offender and sex addiction evaluations and treatment. He participated with the Maricopa County Superior Court's Behavioral Health Committee. He is a board member of Arizona's Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AzAFCC), a board member for the Arizona Psychological Foundation (AzPF), a former member of Arizona's Domestic Relations Committee, and a former co-chair of the Arizona Psychological Association's forensic committee, the former Communications Representative for the Arizona Psychological Association (AzPA), and a former governing council member of the Arizona Psychological Association (AzPA).

