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Top 12 Tips for Co-Parent Boundaries

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When parents separate, their lives need more clearly defined boundaries for their sake and for the children. Two of the most important parenting skills are managing one's own stress and modeling healthy adult relationship communication. Setting boundaries individually and jointly can protect children from situations where they might be exposed to too much of their parent's distress and also show them that their separated parents can successfully manage their new lives. The following 12 tips can help:

1. It's About the Children

It's easy to get wrapped up in setting, defending or pushing boundaries because of issues between the parents. After all, everything is different after parents separate and the need for boundaries is much stronger. However, the focus should always be on the children and what's in their best interest. Sometimes stronger boundaries are worth fighting for (for the children's benefit) and other times it's best to be flexible (for the children's benefit). Ask yourself which would be less stressful for the children in the long run. If you're unsure, get consultation or advice. With rare exceptions, they are expected to have a significant relationship with both parents. So don't give the appearance of trying to block your child's relationship with the other parent, while still having reasonable boundaries to avoid exposing them to too much stress.

2. Separate Homes—Really

As soon as possible, it's best to have respect for each other's privacy by establishing rights and rules about the family residence. The easiest way to think about rules is to think of the parent who stays (if that's possible) as the "tenant" and the two of you as the "landlord." Don't come over except by the agreement of the tenant. Don't make big decisions without the agreement of the other landlord (like selling the home or breaking a lease). The former family residence is now one co-parent's residence, just as the other co-parent's new residence is treated as their separate space. Sometimes parents agree to change the locks. Of course, if there are restraining orders, access may be restricted by court order and the orders should be strictly followed.

3. Parenting Time—and Place

In the early stages of most separations, it's best to establish clearly separate time with the children, without the other parent present. Some parents continue to live together for a while or the "out-parent" has their parenting time at the family residence. This arrangement can work in some cases, but it should be very short-term, so that the out-parent does not feel limited or judged while caring for the children, and the in-parent

does not feel crowded and unable to have privacy. Some parents attempt to be “gatekeepers” between the child and the other parent, but this is not standard and should only occur when court orders say so.

4. Parenting Decisions

Each parent should have sole decision-making authority in their home regarding rules and responsibilities, bedtimes and chores, during their parenting time. Each should be allowed to make occasional suggestions to the other, but they are only suggestions. It’s up to the “on duty” parent to decide if they want to use the suggestions. There may be some good ideas to consider, so be open-minded. But children also need to learn that there is more than one way of doing things. If there’s ongoing dispute about major joint parenting decisions or the overall parenting schedule, those adjustments should be made with professional assistance, such as a mediator or other professional.

5. Picking up the Children

Exchanges between co-parents can be one of the most stressful times for children. There is a range of levels of boundaries that parents can set. First is simply agreeing not to discuss “issues” in front of the children during an exchange. While it may seem convenient, it can easily escalate into conflict. Second is not being around each other during an exchange, such as having one parent pick up the children by staying in the car at the curbside in front of the home. Third is not being at the same location at all, such as having each parent pick up the children at school and return to school. Fourth is having exchanges supervised by a neutral third person, such as a relative or friend, or even a professional if necessary. Fifth is neither parent should videotape, record or bring hostile associates to a parenting exchange. Sixth is to avoid calling the police if there is a difficult exchange. Protect the children from such a humiliating experience and discuss it later away from the children, such as with a lawyer, counselor or mediator.

6. Contact During Other Parent’s Time

When co-parents have good communication, they still respect each other’s time with the children. Phone calls should be at reasonable times for the other parent and for the child. When communication is potentially tense, setting a schedule for phone calls can help, such as Tuesday and Thursday evening between 7:00 and 7:30pm. If communication is disruptive or very difficult, it may be best to have no calls in or out of the other parent’s home. Children often feel relieved that they do not have to talk to one parent while at the other’s home. It reduces the likelihood that they will be quizzed by one or both parents about their activities or the call.

7. Children’s Events

Special events for the children, such as sports or school events should be about the children. If the parents can tolerate being at the same event—and the child wants both parents there—then parents should make every effort to make it a positive experience without raising any “issues.” If it could be tense, plan to have no interaction and sit in separate areas. If it could be extremely tense, parents should take turns attending these special occasions, or strictly follow the parenting schedule so that only the parent caring for the child attends events that occur during their time.

8. Contact between the Co-Parents

If there is ongoing tension between the parents, many agree to communicate by email except in emergencies. Court orders in high conflict cases often require that the parents communicate only by email. Many courts order parents to communicate via [OurFamilyWizard](#), which keeps track of emails so that parents are more respectful and issues of parent communication can be reviewed if necessary later on.

9. Writing Emails

One method of writing emails is the BIFF Response method, which was especially designed for responding to hostility in writing. This method involves making emails brief, informative, friendly and firm. “Brief” usually means just a paragraph or two, so the email doesn’t say more than absolutely necessary. “Informative” means no opinions, emotions, defenses, advice or admonishments—just straight information, such as who will do what, when and where. “Friendly” means including a friendly greeting (Thanks for responding...) or closing. “Firm” doesn’t mean harsh—it means ending the conversation without one last challenge to the other person or starting a new conflict. For more information, see www.BIFFresponse.com.

10. Avoid Using Children as Messengers

One of the most common mistakes separated parents make is to tell the children to tell the other parent some piece of information. It may seem very convenient, since we do this all the time with adults. But it can be very stressful for the child, who is rightfully afraid he or she will suffer the other parent’s anger or irritation with the message. If an important information exchange is needed, then the parent should use email. If it’s urgent, a text message could be sufficient.

11. Discussions Away from the Children

If there are likely to be difficult phone calls or in-person conversations between the co-parents they should be held away from the children. This means closing the door to a room where the conversation or phone call takes place. This also means being careful not to make disparaging remarks about the other parent in the presence of the child and not allowing others to do so. (This is a common court order.) In the event that a disparaging remark is made (no one is perfect), it is important to make a “repairing comment,” that lets the child know that you really do support the other parent’s relationship with them and don’t mean to disrespect that.

12. Discussions with the Children

Each parent should be able to discuss anything with the children without restriction by the other parent. But each parent should also have appropriate boundaries for what topics they discuss with the child. Parents should avoid quizzing the child about the other parent’s household or social life. On the other hand, it’s normal and appropriate to ask a child in general terms “How are you doing? How was your weekend?” That’s part of learning social skills. If the child wants to talk about their time at the other parent’s home, that should be fine. If not, that should be fine too. If one parent is concerned that the other parent is being unsafe or abusive, that parent should avoid quizzing the child and instead consult with a professional about what to do. Children who are questioned

repeatedly become less reliable sources of information and more stressed. Better to keep such concerns out of your own relationship with the children, so that they can focus on being children and being happy when they are with you.

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Bill Eddy, Andrea LaRochelle, and Jeff Chang, will present a workshop on Saturday, June 4, at the AFCC 53rd Annual Conference in Seattle. The workshop is titled “New Ways for Families: Teaching Your Clients Four Big Skills In-Person and Online.” See the [AFCC website](#) for details and to register.