

# Managing parents' emotions: tips to keep the separation process moving



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*It is hard sometimes to help parents focus on the legalities of the divorce when they are in emotional turmoil and looking to their lawyer for emotional support. So how do we define our boundaries in a way that is both supportive for our clients with children, and helpful for us?*

The role of a family law professional working with divorcing or separating parents often goes well beyond that of “just” a lawyer. Over and above their legal role, the family law professional may also act as counsellor, mediator, and confidant.

## The challenge

Many separating parents are experiencing strong emotions. Often, one partner may be less prepared for the separation, and may react in a very primal way. They may be terrified of losing their children, angry and vengeful, or confused and lost. They experience numerous negative emotions such as anger, grief, anxiety, panic and fear. We call these “high emotions” because the levels of adrenaline and cortisol released into our body rise when we are experiencing them. We all recognise these emotions: they are raw, all-consuming, and often feel inescapable. The emotions hijack our brain, leaving us unable to focus, take decisions, or be rational, objective and balanced.

High emotions are often linked with fight, flight, or freeze (FFF) responses to traumatic events. The fight response programmes us to aggressively defend our corner, the flight response makes us want to run away and hide, and the freeze response leaves us paralysed and unable to take decisions. The heightened levels of adrenaline and cortisol associated with the FFF responses can swamp us and make it impossible for us to see and think clearly. They make us self-protect and look inwards, making it very difficult to understand what others in the family may be feeling – particularly an ex-partner, and children.

When couples with children are divorcing or separating, they are often in just such a state of high emotion. Communicating with clients when they are in this heightened state is extremely difficult. For family professionals trying to move

parents through a divorce procedure it adds new challenges, and can be tricky, delicate and time-consuming. And for collaborative lawyers, who aim to ensure the divorce process runs as smoothly as possible, it is a particular challenge. Often your clients' children have been exposed to parents running on adrenaline and cortisol for an extended period of time, and as a result the welfare of the entire family may be at stake.

As a co-parent coach I am trained to help parents caught in heightened states of emotion. I work with separating parents to move away from that negative space and move towards a positive place where they are able to think more clearly – freeing them to see other perspectives and make good decisions. As well as coaching legal teams on how to do this themselves, Rolling Stone Coaching runs a unique co-parent coaching programme called The Co-Parent Way. We specialise in moving clients with children out of high emotion and into a place where they can take logical steps forward. Our aim is to enable the children of our clients to have access to functioning and supportive parents.

## Helping to make divorce and co-parenting simpler

One of the most common questions I am asked by lawyers is: “How do we get our client to a place where we can make practical decisions and move the divorce forward?” The answer to this question often lies in the root cause of the high emotion. For instance, if your client feels powerful anger towards their ex-partner and constantly verbally attacks them, it is highly likely that they are afraid. Experience shows us that clients with children are very often afraid that they will lose access to their children. Even if it's not logical, it's primal; and you can't deal with a primal emotion with practical advice. You need to meet clients where they find themselves, hear them – and, vitally, help

them feel heard – and then work with them to move them through the adrenaline, the cortisol, and the emotion.

## The common emotional states

Our experience shows that the three most common emotional states amongst clients with children are fear, emotional turmoil, and resistance to bravery. Here are some pointers on how to encourage clients out of those negative spaces.

### **Fear**

Parenting with someone you no longer trust is very difficult. There is often real fear that an ex-partner will try to remove access to their children. The actions of parents who are in this space can be illogical and irrational.

As a lawyer you can reassure your clients (where appropriate) that they will still see their children, albeit in a different way. Be honest, be strong, and help clients understand that even though it will be different, they are still a parent. Just because their child is not going to be at home all the time doesn't make the client any less of a mum or a dad. Practically, help them find positive actions they can take when their child is not with them. Something that will help them grow as a person and stretch them. Neurologically, when we are being positively and intellectually stretched, we are calmer, more focused and happier, meaning we are more likely to keep difficult times in perspective.

In co-parent coaching we try to deal with parental fears using various techniques such as perspective work, challenging the catastrophising scenarios that a parent may bring to a session, and uncovering fear and anger in order to move away from it and move forward. Co-parent coaching is not therapy – it's all about working with parents to get them to a place where they are secure enough to communicate effectively with their ex-partner about their kids.

### **Emotional turmoil**

When relationships end we can be consumed by mixed emotions: anger, guilt, fear, relief, sadness... a sense of freedom. Often we feel a mix of these all at once and it creates emotional turmoil. When clients are going through relationship breakdown and are in this state, they become self-interested and introspective. It can be very difficult for a client to see beyond their own emotions and it becomes harder for them to protect their children emotionally from harm – and also harder to accept their own responsibility in doing so.

One of our key coaching principles – which will also be useful for lawyers – is non-escalation of emotions. It is vital not to mirror your client's level of high emotion – something that is sometimes more easily said than done. Staying calm and non-judgemental, and holding the space – whilst fully focusing on your client, listening to them, and responding minimally – is useful here. When you are able to achieve this, clients feel heard and seen, and whatever turmoil they are in may ease a little to enable you to return to legal decisions.

In co-parent coaching we regularly work with parents in emotional turmoil. There are specific techniques we

use such as mirroring, third entity exercises, and perspective coaching that help move people out of this debilitating place. We teach them how to use these techniques in their lives so when the coaching is finished, they have long-term tools and knowledge they can use when they need them.

### **Resistance to bravery**

It's hard to let go of something we are clinging to and take a risk on change. Many parents will have resistance to doing this, but this is exactly what keeps them bound to the status quo. It may be necessary to encourage your clients to take brave steps out of their current space to ensure they can get to a place where they are confidently making decisions that are the best and fairest for their children. Sometimes it can be as simple as asking them, what would be the brave thing to do here? Or what would your children ask you to do? Another question we would ask in coaching is, "if you were brave, what would it look like?" and then, "what would that feel like?" We encourage clients to paint a vivid mental picture of that scene and help them feel the positive emotions that would come with being brave. Often the positive emotions are linked to a picture of their children happily and confidently moving between two homes because both parents are willing to enable that, and trust each other enough to be a good parenting team.

In co-parent coaching we use other techniques to encourage bravery. As an example I will refer to some clients I have been working with recently (their names have been changed). Andy and Denise had a really messy divorce involving a terrible betrayal. The betrayal was all that either of them could see, and their parenting became tangled up in that betrayal. I met them when they knew they were in a mess and not parenting their four children in a way that either of them wanted to.

Andy was referred to me by a law firm who had also encouraged Denise's lawyer to try out co-parent coaching. We created a "co-parent charter" for them, based on what they agreed they wanted to achieve with their parenting, what to do if something went wrong, how to address emergency situations and so on. This charter guides them beyond the coaching sessions and sets the intention and the boundaries for their parenting. It also gives them a plan of what to do when things go wrong, or when there are bumps in the road. By having this route map to follow, it enabled Andy and Denise to become more self-sufficient in their divorce and their plan for co-parenting. It meant that there were fewer emails and phone calls to their lawyers for mundane and emotional issues, thereby freeing up their lawyers to concentrate on the legal side of things.

## Conclusion

We all know communication is the key to a smooth and collaborative divorce and yet it is extremely hard for clients with children to communicate and to hear what others are saying when they are in a place of high emotion. We know that divorce will never be completely non-emotional, but if we can help our clients navigate those emotions



in a healthier, non-catastrophic way, then we are really helping their children. The long drawn-out processes that many divorces end in, benefit no one. They leave emotional scars and damage that is often irreparable. By taking action where you can or by referring a client out to a co-parent

coach we can help safeguard their children and help the legal system work more efficiently.

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