

7.

All a Winner or Winner Take All

Negotiating Agreements



That's why the title of this chapter is "All a Winner or Winner Take All." In post-divorce parenting, *if either parent wins at the other's expense then everyone loses*. The only way for a parent to win is to make the child the clear winner. Then, regardless of which parent wins or loses the immediate argument, they are all winners in the long-term view.

Let's see how this works: One parent has all the financial security; the other falls into poverty. Who wins? The child can't escape the part of her life spent in poverty. The wealthier parent wins the financial argument and keeps most of the money; but the child loses the war by experiencing poverty's dangerous side effects. In the long term, they both lose.

If winning is defined as finding the solution that is best for the child, then every problem has a solution acceptable to both parents. Co-parents now become collaborators who solve problems rather than adversaries who make problems. When you find the best solution for your child, then you can say, "I've won."

Typical Problems

Post-divorce parents share several common problems. These problems occur frequently in post-divorce situations; some require a negotiated settlement. That does not mean they require a court settlement; it means that they may need strategic problem-solving in order to get to a negotiated co-parent agreement. Common problems include the ones listed below.

Problems Commonly Requiring Negotiated Solutions in Post-divorce Parenting

- Schedules
- Extracurricular activities
- Religion
- Choice of doctor
- Bedtime
- Food selection
- Public vs. private school
- Selection of college

Value-Laden

You'll see that many of these topics are value-laden. They may have deeper meaning attached to them than the surface issue. For example, the a child's bedtime may have more to do with the parent's own time-management, rigidity with rules and comfort with routines than with the child's need for sleep.

Acceptance of Differences

It may be hard for co-parents to realize that all people have differences. It's what makes us unique and our lives interesting. We all see life through a filtered lens built out of our own personal experiences and value systems. Therefore any two people will bring differing opinions and perceptions into a discussion of decisions or problems requiring solutions. However, the threat to children in post-divorce families is that the opinions solidify into positions. Then parents start fighting to maintain their positions rather than concentrate on solving the child's problem.



some problems in school. What I'd like is to go together and find out what we can do to help."

IGNITING THE FUSE

Remember, the way you describe the problem has the potential for igniting a fuse. If you use a voice tone that's critical or demanding, body language that is disrespectful or threatening, or words that blame or criticize, you'll decrease the chances of finding a solution. (*Example: "John isn't getting his homework done. He's lazy, just like you."*) Instead, you'll ensure that your child's problem continues. Keep the communication principles from the last chapter in mind when you raise the problem or voice your concern.

SAMPLE SITUATION

Robert and Jackie have a daughter named Rachel. Robert picks Rachel up each Friday night at 6:00 PM. However, he generally calls Jackie from his office informing her that he will be late to pick up Rachel. Typically, the parents exchange insults and end up in an argument. Jackie is determined to solve the problem. On a previous attempt, Jackie tried an "I" statement to let Robert know what she wanted from him. However, the problem hasn't been solved. Robert is still between 15 minutes and an hour late every Friday. Now, Jackie is going to bring up the problem again. If you were Jackie how would you describe the problem to Robert?

STEP 1.

SAMPLE: I'm anxious and concerned when Rachel doesn't get picked up on time on Friday nights. I'm concerned that Rachel is worried about you not coming and I get anxious because I know I'll be late to meet with my friends. And when I get stressed out, I worry that my stress adds to Rachel's stress. I'd like to find a solution to this problem that works for both of us.

<p style="text-align: center;">Step 2 Give opinion; Reflect opinion</p>

Step 2 is perhaps the most critical step in moving from the problem to the solution. When this step isn't handled carefully, the conversation becomes refocused on the relationship between the co-parents rather than staying focused on solving the child's problem. *This step is the hardest for most parents to follow. It takes commitment to the long-term solution; it takes self-control to put one's emotions aside temporarily; it takes self-discipline to use an unfamiliar skill.*

This is what you do: The co-parents take turns giving their opinions as to how they perceive the problem or how the problem affects them. Immediately following the expressed opinion, the other co-parent reflects the words expressed by the first co-parent.



Caution

Remember, reflecting is where the problem can easily turn into an argument. If you respond to the problem by taking it personally, you will fuel the flames and turn the problem into a fight. One way this happens is by reacting defensively when the problem is described: "I'm not giving you or Rachel stress. I'm just trying to do my job." The other way to fuel the flames is by acting like the problem is a personal attack requiring a counterattack.

That would sound like this: "I'm just trying to do my job. You're the one causing Rachel stress when you get so tied to a stupid clock. Can't you lighten up a little?" With each parent expressing his opinion and then having the co-parent reflect it, it is much more likely that they'll stay focused on the child's problem and find a mutually agreeable solution.

Step 3 Brainstorm Solutions

Step 3 is where alternative solutions are proposed. It's very important that you don't judge or evaluate solutions at the same time you're brainstorming potential options. Instead, propose or suggest as many ideas as you can. You can get real crazy here and suggest ideas that you don't like or that sound unusual. When one idea is suggested, try suggesting the opposite idea. By opening your minds up to all kinds of creative solutions, you might come up with an outlandish idea that works better than all the simple solutions you thought of at first.

BRAINSTORM OPTIONS TO THE 'FRIDAY NIGHT' DILEMMA (Jackie and Robert's Problem)

Robert picks up Rachel at midnight.

Robert picks up Rachel on Saturday.

Jackie picks up Robert.

Robert picks up Rachel when Jackie returns.

Jackie leaves Rachel alone until Robert arrives.

Jackie gets a sitter.

Jackie stays home on Friday nights.

Can you see how few of these provide a good solution but any one of them provides a germ of a potentially great solution? Staying open to ideas without pre-judging them is an absolute must. No one is allowed to say an idea is out of bounds or unacceptable at this stage. If you do, then it prevents other ideas from emerging. A large number of potential ideas will emerge only if people think they won't be rejected for having a stupid idea. Then the ideas will flow more freely and a great idea may be found among them.



By reviewing these guidelines before leaving the appointment, co-parents can prevent miscommunication from happening. You'll prevent the frustration that can occur when there isn't clarity about everyone's responsibilities. Plus you'll head off the "I thought you were going to do that," comment that interferes with the success of the whole process.

Step 6 **Put the Solution into Action**

Here is where the rubber meets the road, when you put your agreement into action. This is so straightforward that there shouldn't be any problem. Why is there?

Two reasons:

1. A parent is not committed to the solution.
2. A parent forgets about the long-term commitment to his/her child and falls back on the short-term desire to win the battle with co-parent.

Commitment

Commitment is crucial to the long term goal of a healthy upbringing for your child. If your co-parent loses faith in your willingness to carry out your agreements, you put both the co-parent relationship and your child's well-being in jeopardy. A sense of mistrust is extremely damaging to the long-term effectiveness of your parenting.

It is destructive to your child's future relationships when there is not a sense of trust forged early in his life. Relationships thrive on trust and they wither from mistrust. If either your child or your co-parent mistrusts you, the poison emitted will seep into the fabric of your child's trust in others. You are the role model; you demonstrate the way. Whenever you agree to a solution you should carry it through; fulfilling your commitments becomes one of your child's fundamental life supports.

Setting Time Limits

When you are having difficulty agreeing to any of the proposed solutions but you want to support solving the problem, try this idea. Limit the solution to a designated period of time. It might be a few days or a few months, depending on the situation. Be sure to make the specified time period long enough to give the solution a chance to work. That may mean including enough time to adjust to the change. Give it a fair shake so that you can get accurate feedback on how well the solution works.

By setting a designated period of time for trying out the solution, you don't have to put all your eggs in one basket. You may be dragging your feet on agreeing to any proposed solution because you're afraid that you'll have to live with the results forever. If you designate a specific period of time for evaluating the solution in action, you're free to return to the drawing board and renegotiate if the solution isn't working for either you or your child. You don't have to choose the perfect solution the first time; you only have to find a solution that you're willing to try for a limited time. Ask yourself, "Can I live with this for three weeks?" If the answer is yes, then it's a great solution. You've got something to try—and it just might work out for the long term.

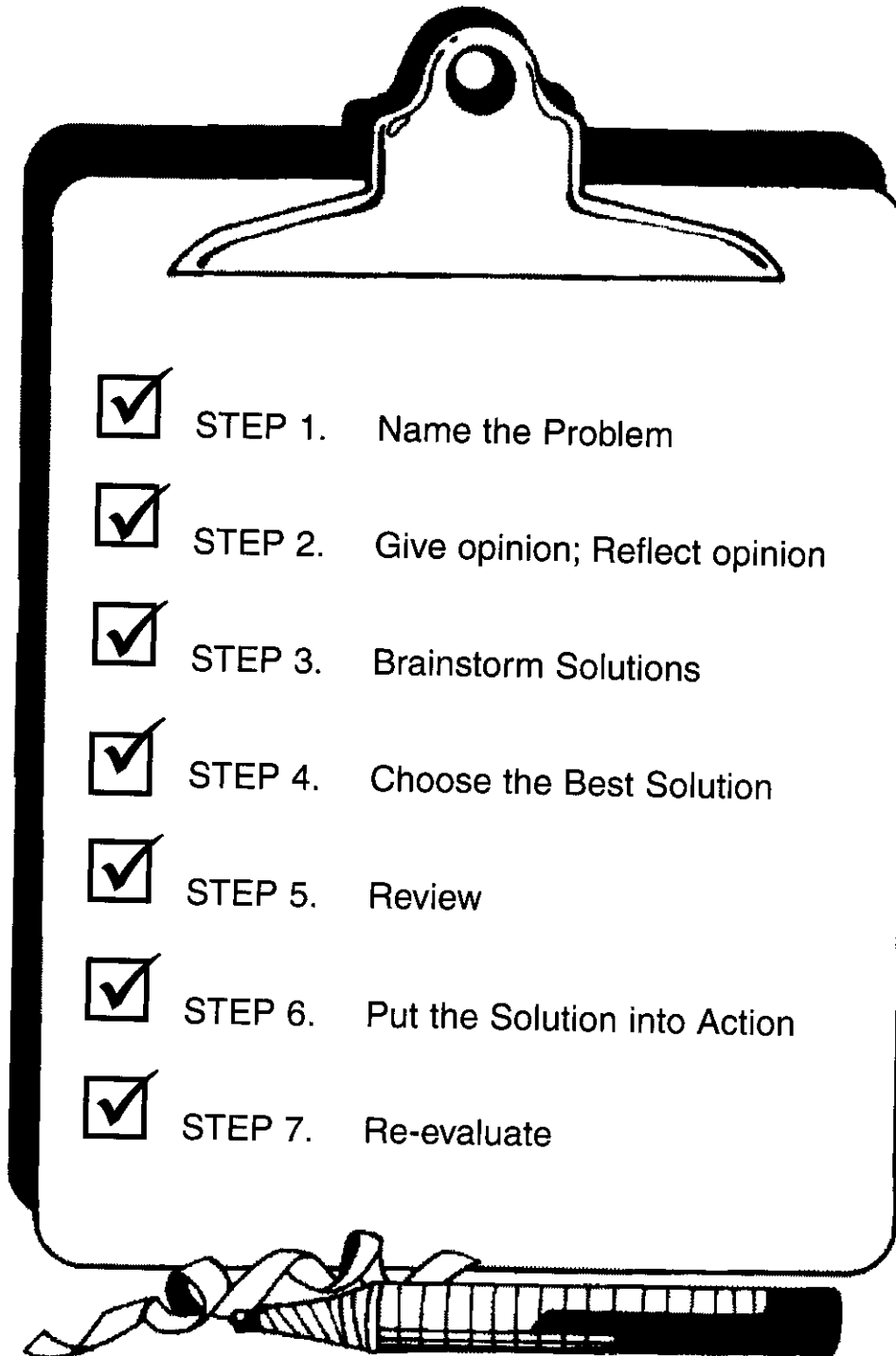




Exercises

NEGOTIATING AGREEMENT

Develop a step-by-step process to use as a guide. Outline the steps to negotiating agreement in the spaces provided.





REVISED PARENTAL CONCERNS

Look back to page 18 and 19 where you have been recording your parenting concerns. Mark off any issues that have been resolved. Transfer the remaining parenting concerns to this page. Record them using the "I" statement format.

I feel/felt _____ when _____ and what I'd like is _____.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

