

# Parent-Child Contact Problems

## Parent Guide



**The following guide was created by the Parental Involvement and Outreach Subcommittee (PIOS) of the Oregon State Family Law Advisory Committee.**

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*This guide is dedicated to the memory of Brenna Wheeler Moore. Brenna was an Oregon attorney and member of the PIOS subcommittee whose work was focused on helping families resolve disputes around divorce and separation. Her dedication to families is shared in her generous contributions to this guidebook.*

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### I. Introduction

If you're reading this guide, it may be because your child is having a hard time spending time with a parent. We wrote this guide to help you sort out what is going on. We also want to give you practical ideas on how to make the problem better and keep it from getting worse.

***This guide shares a lot of ideas about why a child might resist contact with a parent. But it is important to know that when there have been serious problems like child abuse and intimate partner violence, the child's resistance needs to be examined by professionals who can make sure the safety of the children and protective parent are the top priority. If there are safety concerns, be sure to get outside support to help you and your child stay SAFE, and do that FIRST (See Safety resources at the end of this guide).***

Children often feel more comfortable with one parent or the other. This is normal and healthy. It happens in families that are together in one home, and it happens in separated families. It happens for a lot of reasons, like shared interests, the child's age, or gender, or other reasons. It can also change over time. The important thing is that studies show that children need to have both parents in their lives, even when a child prefers one parent.

Preferring one parent is only a problem when a child begins to reject being with the other parent. This is called “resist” or “refuse” behavior, and can happen for many reasons. Some children will temporarily resist a parent for a time after an upsetting episode. This kind of short-term resistance toward a parent usually gets better, so long as the child feels support for their relationship with that parent. Usually, it takes more than upsetting interactions or strict discipline for a child to reject a parent. Sometimes if a child is being abused or witnessing other family members being abused, they may withdraw from a relationship with the abusive parent for a longer period of time. This is called “Justified Rejection” and the best solutions for that problem are to protect the child and increase the safety of the family system by getting help to stop the abuse.



Many times, children reject parents when there is a complicated web of family issues that create a lot of conflict between parents. Many parents in this situation accuse the other parent of “alienating” the child. It is almost never that simple. Usually it is not one parent who is the one and only cause of a parent-child contact problem. Parent-child contact problems are hardly ever caused either by abuse alone, or by alienating behaviors alone. The truth is, most parent-child contact problems happen because of complicated family dynamics.



A family is a complex web of relationships. Families run as a “system,” where family members have intense emotional connections to each other. Even if they do not live together, each person's behavior has an impact on the other members. A change in each person’s behavior can change the whole system, for better, or for worse. A child’s family can include many people, in addition to their parents. Children who have two homes do best when their families problem-solve and work together instead of fighting.

If you are looking for a professional to help you deal with a parent-child contact problem, it’s useful to know that children will get the most help from counselors who deal with the whole family system, rather than those who focus on just one person or behavior. When counselors work with only the child, or just the child and one parent, they usually miss important parts of the picture. It is hard to make really good suggestions when important information is missing.

## II Why are parent-child contact problems a problem for children?



A lot is understood about how children grow up, and what they need to become healthy, happy adults. Parents teach children how the world works. Children’s relationships with their parents set patterns in their brains for how their relationships with everyone else will be. Healthy attachments to both parents lead to **healthy attachments** to friends, teachers, coaches, spouses, and co-workers. Studies show that, when the parents are both safe, contact with both parents is best for children.

No parent is perfect. All families have challenges. Children need to learn positive ways to deal with those challenges. Then they can use those skills in other relationships for the rest of their lives. The process of figuring out how to work with people’s challenges can build strength in a child. When there has been injury to an important relationship (like a parent-child relationship), this healing process is called “repair.”

*Studies show that, even in cases where a child has not been abused, children who stop seeing a parent can end up with the same kinds of problems as children who were abused (feeling bad about themselves, not achieving their potential, having relationship problems, having mental health problems). A lot of the damage from abuse happens because a child can’t trust or feel safe with a person they are supposed to feel safe with. When a child rejects a parent, they are signaling that they are feeling uncomfortable with their family relationship. Children feel safe when they are free from actual harm (mentally, emotionally and physically), when they have people who comfort and soothe them, and when they get the help they need to solve problems.*

When a child's trust with a parent is broken, it is like the child has a broken arm. If people help them repair it quickly, it usually heals very well. If parents



wait too long and don't get the relationship back on the right track quickly, sometimes it never heals right – just like a broken arm. This broken trust is often called a rupture. A rupture can be defined as a break in the connection between two people. Multiple rupture events without any repair causes the relationship to erode over time and changes how a child's brain works. Without repair, a child's brain may not have as healthy a development as it otherwise would.

Children do better when the adults around them help them find a way to be safe and also **repair** relationships. Sometimes that looks like children having shorter periods of contact with a parent, with someone supervising to assure they are emotionally and physically safe. Parents can also use family therapy to establish boundaries (safety rules) and have difficult conversations that help repair relationships.

Parents who agree upon their own repair solutions are usually happier with their agreements and stick with them. If parents cannot agree on a way to find safe space and help their child repair a parent relationship, the courts will do it for them.

### III. How does the resist/refuse dynamic become such a problem?



There are many different family dynamics that can eventually develop into a resist/refuse problem, so it is important to look closely at your individual family situation and figure out all of the different sources so that you can help your child repair what is going wrong for them. As parents, we have a huge influence on our children's thoughts and feelings. If your child is struggling in their relationship with you or their other parent, there is a lot you can do to help. Being willing to make some changes in how you respond to the situation can make a big difference.

An important first step is for each parent to accept that their child would benefit from having a safe and positive connection with both parents. If you are the preferred parent, your child may look to you to help them find a safe way to connect with the other parent. It's easy to make the rejection issues worse by letting your upset feelings at the other parent get in the way of helping your child find a way to connect with their other parent.



If you and your co-parent argue a lot about parenting, parent-child contact problems are more likely to happen. Children are very stressed by constant fighting between their parents, and they lack adult coping skills. When children are in the middle of parents fighting, they may reject one parent as a way to stay out of the war zone.

When parents get into physical fights, some children will stay away from one or both parents. A child may be worried when one parent is physically abusive to the other, that they too, will be hit. Sometimes children avoid a parent because they think that parent is weak, and they want to learn how to be strong. Sometimes, if a parent directly abuses a child, the child will avoid that parent for a long time, even after the abuse has stopped and the child is safe. As you read on, keep in mind how ongoing fighting might be making “normal problems” much worse.

Now look at your child’s world. Consider your family system and ALL of the possible reasons your child is struggling in their relationship with a parent. The reasons may be a mix of different things -- the child’s nature, issues with parents, the homes, and parents fighting. Below are some common and not-so-common reasons that parent-child contact problems develop. The information we are sharing with you is described by the researcher, Benjamin Garber (Garber’s Ecological Model).

### **A. Looking at Your Child**

**The parenting plan should meet your child’s unique needs.** Is there something about your child’s personality that adds to their struggle with a parent?

Personality, or “temperament,” describes how your child interacts with the world. Some kids are flexible and “roll with it” when changes come. Other children like their routine and get upset when things change. Some children easily focus and stick to tasks, while other children are easily distracted or discouraged. Some children get overwhelmed by lots of sound and sights, and want things quiet and slow. Other children love an exciting environment.

It may be easier to understand your child if they have a similar temperament to yours. It may be harder to understand a child who has a very different temperament from yours. Sometimes there is friction between a child and parent who are very alike (such as, when both like to express feelings, or both have a strong need to win).



Children with different temperaments handle separation differently. Some children adapt to new things quickly, while others take time to warm up. In the past, did your child resist being separated from either parent? For example, did they avoid sleepovers at friends, or push back on being dropped off at school or daycare? Have they ever spent the night away from home?

In a home with both parents, parents may be able to work together to manage different children’s temperaments. When a child moves between two homes, it is still important for parents to work with children’s temperaments in a way that lets children succeed in both homes. It is ideal if parenting styles will take into account your child’s temperament.

Following are some real-life examples. (Names have been changed to protect the families' privacy).

### ***Example: An anxious child***

Jem has always been uncomfortable being apart from his parents. Trying new activities, or going new places, especially without his parents, gives him an upset stomach, headache and makes him sweat. On the first day of preschool, Jem refused to eat and sat in a corner sucking his thumb. The next day Jem refused to go at all, so his parents withdrew him. When all-day elementary school started, Jem's worries increased. He worried about his parents when they were away from home, and would only stay with grandparents when a sitter was needed. Now that his parents live in separate homes, Jem is refusing to sleep at Dad's during the week. During the week Mom is able to be with Jem more, so he prefers to stay with her rather than move between homes. On weekends Dad doesn't work, so Jem loves being with him. Jem looks for reassurance that both of his parents are safe, and needs help to learn to cope with his worries.

Sometimes, kids like Jem can really use extra support like an individual therapist to help find ways to reassure themselves. In addition, family therapists may be able to help both parents work together to find ways for Jem to feel safe, comfortable and secure in both homes. It may take Jem a little time to build a safe haven in his second home.

Some children have medical conditions, or mental health struggles that need medications or appointments with care providers. They might need special daily routines to be at their best. In most families, one parent was assigned the role of care provider, and so your child may be more comfortable with that parent continuing to meet these needs. Whether you are or are not that parent, how can you improve your contact with your co-parent so that you are both fully prepared to care for your child?



### ***Example: A child with unique needs***

Shayla has been given the medical diagnosis of autism. She does better when she is able to have time to adjust to her school day. One parent gets Shayla to school early, giving her plenty of time to relax and settle in before lessons begin. That parent's style is organized, so they are able to manage getting Shayla to appointments, make sure she takes her medications as prescribed, and have everything she needs to have a good day. The other parent is less structured and time-focused, so Shayla sometimes misses getting her medications, and often



gets to school late. As a result of not having morning warm-up time, Shayla has melt-downs, which upsets the class.

For Shayla to do her best, both parents need to understand her unique needs. Both need to know how best to set up her environment so she succeeds. There are many ways to help kids like Shayla, and her family will need to see what resources they have to meet her needs. Maybe Shayla can ride a bus or get a ride with a friend or even from her other parent when she is at the less-organized parent's home. Or, maybe more school nights can be spent with the parent who is more organized. Or, maybe the less-organized parent can work with a coach to learn ways to be more timely for Shayla's schedule.

## B. Looking at the Parents

**Parenting Plans need to consider the unique strengths and weaknesses of both parents and how those may change over me.** There are differing parenting styles and



beliefs, and some styles work better with different temperaments of children than others. Some parents set the rules with strong daily routines and expect children to follow them closely. Other parents negotiate the rules and consequences with children, and have a flexible daily routine. Still other parents are so worried about upsetting their children that they don't set rules

or follow through with expectations. Children need predictability and structure, with enough flexibility so they learn how to deal with unexpected changes or events.

Some children struggle simply because the routines are too different between the homes (like bedtimes that are two hours apart). Some might struggle because routines are too strict or too loose. Differences in parenting styles can create conflicts between parents, and also between parents and children changing between households. A child may prefer the parent with structure, OR the parent with fewer expectations. Problems get worse if the preferred parent supports, consciously or unconsciously, their child's resistance toward the other parent's routine. Problems also get worse when parents do not adapt their parenting style to better meet their child's needs and fit their child's temperament.

A **sensitive, responsive** parent is one who notices their child's feelings and behaviors, correctly reads those signals, and tries a new approach to meet their child's needs. Your parenting style rises out of your temperament, your beliefs and how you were raised. Beyond parenting style, some parents are struggling with their own troubles. Sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between your own needs, and your child's needs. Parenting skills do not come naturally to many people. Most parents need to learn how to parent.



Parents are not perfect, and luckily, they don't have to be! Imperfect parents add value to a child's life. Your child will learn and benefit from watching what you do well and not so well. Studies show that generally speaking, so long as the child is safe, more shared time with each parent is better for children's development. For more information about the special considerations for children under the age of four, please see the **Birth Through Three Guide** at <https://www.multco.us/family-resolution/self-help>.

### *Example: A strict parent*

Amin and Syrah divorced several years ago and have a week on/week off schedule with sons, Kai (age 12) and Tarik (age 16). Amin (Dad) was raised with strict rules, necessary to keep him safe growing up in a war-torn country. In his family, children didn't question a parent's authority and did what they were told. Syrah (Mom) believes rules are important, but that it is also important to listen to children's voices and show respect for their thoughts and feelings.

More often over the last few years, the boys go to Mom and complain that Dad is too strict, punishing them for little things like not finishing their chores before bed, or being a few minutes past curfew. Amin will routinely take away their cell phones if the garbage hasn't been taken out on time, or will shut off the internet if the children debate his many rules. The boys complain that their dad tries to control every aspect of their lives, is not flexible and nothing is up for negotiation. They want to live full-time with their mom who is more flexible and open to discussing curfew and other rules in a more reasonable way. Syrah often tells the boys, "These are the same reasons I left the marriage. Your dad doesn't have a clue when it comes to raising teenagers."

Recently Tarik called Syrah and asked to be picked up after Amin took away his cell phone for being 20 minutes past curfew when a high school football game went into overtime. Syrah immediately drove to Amin's house where Tarik was waiting on the curb with his backpack. Tarik said he'd had it, and never wanted to live with his dad again. He has asked Syrah to get him and Kai their own attorney. Amin knows his relationship with the children has been damaged, and blames Syrah for being too soft of a parent and alienating the children by badmouthing him.

The parents worked with a mediator to help identify and discuss areas of differences in the homes and align parenting styles where possible. The parents also worked with a family therapist to do one-on-one therapy with the children so they could establish better communication, boundaries, and expectations between each parent and child. Working on

the problem relationship is often a better solution for the child in the long run than changing the child's schedule to reduce time with one parent. Changing the schedule just avoids the problem instead of helping the child solve the problem. It helped for Kai and Tarik to work with their dad to find ways to communicate better, so that they could understand and respect Amin's ways, and also so that Amin could get better at listening to them.



## **Example: A recovering parent**

Cindy's parent, Taylor, is in recovery from substance use now, but had been actively using and unstable from the time Cindy was three until she was seven. Now that Taylor is in recovery, they want Cindy to spend overnights with them. Cindy's other parent is not in agreement with overnights, wants supervised contact, proof of treatment, and regular drug tests. Taylor was a great parent until Cindy was three, but Cindy was so little she doesn't remember that. She really wants to feel safe with Taylor, but has some worries about spending weekends with them. Taylor's co-parent is supportive of virtual visits and phone calls.

After a mediated discussion with her co-parent, Taylor was willing to move into parenting time more slowly than they wanted. Cindy's parents worked out a "step-up" parenting plan, starting with shorter blocks of time to build Cindy and Taylor's relationship, before starting overnights. This will allow Cindy to gradually grow more comfortable and build a better foundation for a healthy relationship with Taylor.

Some children get the idea that they need to take care of one of their parents. Sometimes parents give the child that impression, and in other cases certain kids are just natural caregivers. A child may worry about a parent being sad or lonely, or feel they have to protect one parent.

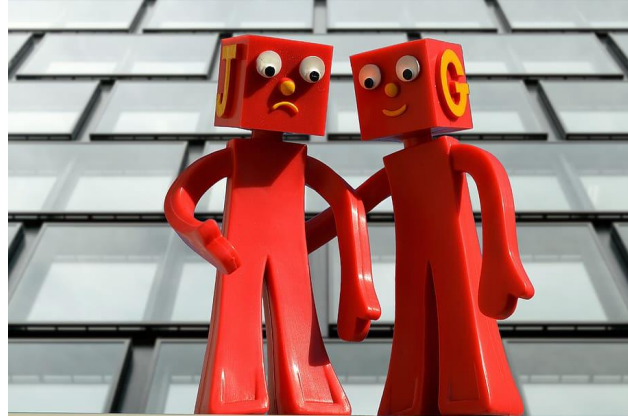


## **Example: A hurting parent**

One of ShanTae's parents, A.J., seems very sad when it's time for ShanTae to go to his other parent, Shawnda's, house. A.J. says things like, "I'll miss you so much," and, "I don't know what I'll do without you." While with the other parent, ShanTae worries constantly about A.J., and thinks that it will be his fault if A.J. has problems or starts drinking again. ShanTae doesn't worry about Shawnda, because Shawnda is strong and will be fine.

A.J. had some parent coaching, and now says things like, "I'll be just fine," and "I love you and I'll see you soon." A.J. also encourages ShanTae to spend time with Shawnda. Shawnda now allows ShanTae to check in with A.J. once each day, so that A.J. can reassure ShanTae about being fine. The family hopes ShanTae can get to a point that the calls are not needed so often. A.J. also makes 'care packages' for ShanTae to take to the other home, so that they can feel connected while they are apart. This also gives ShanTae a clear message that A.J. will take care of ShanTae, instead of the other way around. This made ShanTae so happy that Shawnda started sending care packages too.

Sometimes there have been serious problems that lead to a child's resistance or refusal to spend time with a parent. When there's been family violence or other safety problems, a parent supports their child's safety by supporting the child's resistance. If there are safety concerns, be sure to get outside support to help your child stay SAFELY connected to the other parent.



### ***Example: An angry parent***

Bart's parents, Val and CJ, had an emotionally intense relationship that ended after a physical altercation. They have had a conflicted co-parenting relationship, but both support Bart having good connections with each of them. Val has had a close relationship with Bart. As Bart has grown into a teenager, Val has gotten verbally abusive when Bart pushes against Val's rules. A conflict over screen time escalated, and turned into Val shoving Bart into the wall. Bart was mad and confused, and told CJ about it. Bart's parenting time with Val ended, when Bart refused to go, and CJ supported Bart's refusal.

Val reluctantly started counseling. Therapy first focused on Val being accountable for harming Bart, after which Bart and also CJ were invited to family counseling. This is when the family began to heal. Val found ways to reconnect with Bart to repair their relationship and make Bart feel safe. Val and CJ together came up with better ways to co-parent. Val apologized several times and in a couple of different ways to Bart for choosing to shove him. Bart worked on forgiving Val, and also worked on the things he did that contributed to the really bad fights he had with Val. Those skills will help Bart in his life, when other people get upset with him. Now Val and Bart have a plan and safety rules for spending time together. They all agreed about what will happen if things get scary again. First, they have a plan for Bart to get help or get out before things get physical. Second, if that happens, they all agree that CJ might need to protect Bart again, at least for a while, until the family understands how it got bad again, and whether they need other safety rules.

*If you have concerns about domestic violence, consult a local DV program (see resources at the end of this booklet).*

### C. Looking at the home environment

**Parents can make their home environment more or less welcoming for their child.** No household is a perfect match for every child. However, children grow by coping with challenges and changes, as long as they have help from adults.



Ask yourself these questions: What are the things my child struggles with in each home (chores, homework, siblings, etc.)? How can I offer help and support for my child, for the challenges in my home, and also with the challenges in the other home?

#### *Example: A home with privacy and friends*

Isaiah is shy. He's 11 and entering puberty. At Dad's home, he has to share a room with his younger half-sister, which is really embarrassing! At Mom's he has private space and he can walk to school with his friends. His soccer team friends live in Mom's neighborhood, and get together all the time for unplanned practices and fun in the park. At his mom's home, he really likes seeing his friends, having more privacy, and being a little more independent.

Isaiah's family is going to family therapy to talk about some ideas to help Isaiah feel more comfortable. Dad might be able to convert the under-the-stairs closet into a private room for Isaiah, or might even be able to move into Isaiah's Mom's neighborhood. Isaiah's parents can get him to his Mom's house in the mornings some days, so that he can walk to school with everyone. Isaiah's step-mom agreed to be available a couple of days a week to drive Isaiah to the pick-up soccer games and meetings in the park, so now Isaiah only has one day a week that he has to tell his friends he can't meet them. Isaiah agreed to work hard on his homework on that day so that he is freer for his friends on other days.

#### *Example: Problems with a step-parent*

Dad's girlfriend just moved in with Dad and Jesus. Jesus doesn't like the girlfriend because she keeps acting like she's Jesus's mother, bossing him around. Jesus would rather stay away from her, and be with his mom. Jesus and his Dad went to family therapy and made some rules. Dad, not the girlfriend, will make the rules for Jesus and at least once a week Jesus and Dad will spend special time, just the two of them.





## *Example: A homework problem*

Pham doesn't like math, and doodles during homework time. Pham's parent, Kelly, makes Pham sit at the kitchen table for up to an hour while he resists by writing out problems in a messy, unreadable way. Kelly makes him erase the problems and start all over again, which results in Pham tearing the paper. Then Kelly sends him to his room. Now Pham doesn't want to go home to Kelly, and says so to his other parent. Kelly's co-parent is asking to have Pham in their home on all school nights.

Kelly doesn't like fighting with Pham and realizes it isn't good for either of them. Pham's parents are thinking about sharing the price of a tutor for when Pham is with Kelly, or maybe having Pham spend two hours a day right after school with his other parent, so the homework gets done before Pham goes to Kelly's. Kelly might get a tutor one day a week to watch how the tutor works with Pham and get some ideas that Kelly can use with Pham too.

### D. Co-Parent Conflict

**Conflict itself hurts children and when parents can reduce conflict, the child will be more comfortable in both homes.** As discussed, ongoing parent fighting can make 'normal' problems bigger and more stressful. It is well known that children are harmed by being exposed to ongoing parental conflict. When their lives are a battlefield between parents, children unconsciously try to find ways to cope, whether it's by telling each parent what they want to hear, avoiding a parent, expressing anger at a parent, using drugs, or experiencing anxiety or depression. Children do whatever they can to try to feel safety and relief.

Is it possible that your child may be telling you what you want to hear, to make you happy, or to keep you from feeling sad or angry? The "chameleon child" sacrifices their own identity so they can feel accepted in each of their warring environments. In this situation, a child may act like a different person at each home.



Is your child getting involved in your battles with the other parent? Maybe you are not asking your child to take sides, but are you secretly hoping they do? Do you ask your child to give you information about the other parent, send messages to the other parent, or deliver things to the other parent?



Do you complain about or bad-mouth your child's other parent in front of your child or allow others to do so? Children have an

urgent need to love both parents. Doing these things can make children feel they are responsible for taking care of their parents, rather than the other way around. They can be greatly harmed by hearing negative things about either parent. When they do, they hear negative things about themselves.

### *Example: Embarrassing arguments*

Nevaeh loves both her parents, but hates their fighting with each other. On transition days for Nevaeh, her parents get into awful fights at their front doors. Nevaeh feels humiliated, sure that everyone in her neighborhood thinks her family is “crazy.” Now, on exchange days, she drags the trash and recycling bins from all the neighbors’ yards, lining them up across their parents’ driveways. Nevaeh figures this will give her time to quickly get into the car before her parents start arguing. Nevaeh has also learned that she can make her parents happy by telling each one that they are more special to her than the other. Nevaeh doesn’t want to have to decide things like who she wants to live with, or who is a “better parent.” She especially feels nervous when professionals ask her what her “real opinion” is about her parents.

Nevaeh’s parents realized how embarrassing the fights are to Nevaeh, and how she feels put in the middle of their conflicts. They are going to a co-parent coach so that they can work on a “business relationship” where they don’t have to like each other, but they can have rules for exchanges and other communication. One of Nevaeh’s parents decided to go to individual therapy and wishes the other one would too. But, at least one parent is working on how not to get so mad and how to see the ways that the other parent ‘hooks’ them into a fight. They now feel they have more tools to stay out of arguments and help Nevaeh feel calmer at exchanges.

#### **E. Parent Supports Child’s Refusal**

**Helping your child solve problems with their other parent is better than letting them refuse time with their other parent, so long as safety is not a factor.** Sometimes a parent supports their child’s resistance to having contact with the other parent, because they don’t agree with how the other parent is parenting, or because they want their child to like them best or because they believe it will make their child happier. Sometimes it’s because a parent doesn’t want to deal with conflict—with the other parent, or with their child. If a parent is supporting a child’s refusal due to safety concerns, it is important to consult with Child Protective Services (CPS) and/or child development experts to help create a safety plan appropriate to the specific safety issues.



## *Example: A parent supports a child's refusal*

Noel refuses to spend time at her dad's on the weekend because he makes the family go out on Saturday morning, knock on doors and share information about their faith tradition. Noel says she is embarrassed because her high school classmates whisper behind her back at school when they've seen her knocking on doors and leaving pamphlets. Noel doesn't mind going to faith services but hates the Saturday morning ritual. Noel's mom does not share this faith tradition and supports Noel's refusal to go to her dad's, saying "I'm not going to force my child to do something she doesn't want to do." Noel's mom refuses to talk to Noel's dad about the situation, and doesn't answer the door when he comes to pick up Noel for the weekend. Noel's dad is angry that Noel hasn't had her parenting time with him in many weeks.

A family therapist is helping the family come up with as many ideas as they can to help Noel with this problem. Maybe Noel can go to her dad's at Noon on Saturday instead, and maybe stay until Tuesday morning, instead of going back to Mom on Monday morning. Noel's dad is seeing if she could work with a religious leader on other ways that Noel can respect the church's teachings about sharing their faith with other people. Maybe she can write and color a page for kids, to insert in the pamphlets. Maybe she can spend Saturday mornings with church groups helping people new to the church to feel welcome. Noel feels better now that her family is working together to help her with this problem.

### IV. What can a parent do to change course?



At this point, you might feel overwhelmed. Don't give up! Here's a way to look at the situation by using "buckets" to help you organize a plan.

**Bucket 1: Parenting Problems:** These struggles relate to regular parenting issues. They might be problems that raise tension in your home, or problems that come from differences between parents' homes. In this bucket you put everything that relates to your child's temperament and needs, co-parent communication (and disagreements), and parenting styles (as mentioned above).

These problems are best resolved by parents working with one another, using a problem-solving approach. In this way, they will have fewer fights, relieving stress on their children, and making it more comfortable for the children as they move between households. You might consider two different directions for this type of problem-solving. You might look for ways to co-parent in a unified, more consistent way, so your children have fewer changes between households. Or you might set clear boundaries and expectations with





one another, so you can support each other as you parent differently in each household. Either way, reducing your conflict, and working on the real issues, will help your child manage their life with both parents.

You might be saying to yourself, “That’s fine for parents who communicate, but we don’t talk.” Don’t worry, there are many resources to help you. There are co-parenting apps like Our Family Wizard and TalkingParents that organize communication, can give feedback on the tone of a message or suggest better words, and give tips to improve co-parenting. Self-help books or classes, and parent or family therapy, can help you understand the issues that are triggering tension between you and the other parent. These resources can also teach new ways to communicate, and help you resolve ongoing parent conflict. Mediation can help you talk through disagreements, and figure out some solutions. Ongoing work with a parenting coach can help with persistent problems where there is a lot of conflict.

These resources can help parents to structure their two-home family, for example, by:

- helping children transition between homes
- developing healthy communication plans
- bonding with your child while being supportive of your co-parent
- blending families and introducing new people
- adapting parenting plans to changes in a child’s age and development, parent jobs, etc.



**Bucket 2: Safety Issues with a Parent:** Sometimes a parent may struggle with a serious problem, and in that struggle, put a child at risk. On top of the danger itself, this can give the child complicated and contradictory feelings about that parent. Safety is a reasonable concern when a parent is struggling with anger issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, untreated mental health disorders and PTSD. Parents struggling with these issues might make poor decisions that impact their child’s safety. In Bucket 2, put the things that can be safety risks for your child. Examples: not having your child properly restrained in cars, not providing adequate supervision, allowing children to be exposed to drugs or paraphernalia, failing to lock away guns,

threatening or physically harming children or their family members. If the other parent is struggling with issues like these, you will need to consider ways to support your child’s connection with that parent, while still making sure that your child is safe. If you have had struggles with issues like these, it’s important to know that it will take time to rebuild trust with your children, and with their other adults. You may need to provide concrete safety measures while that trust is being rebuilt.

Fixing Bucket 2 problems is a little more complicated than fixing Bucket 1 problems. Risks can sometimes be reduced by safety rules that come from family therapy, or an authority (such as the Court or CPS). Some possible options are: monitored parenting time, limiting parenting time to public locations or daytime only, video chats, relapse plans, and parenting time with a trusted third person present. A parent participating in an intervention or therapy to address

unsafe behaviors is often necessary. These solutions often need to be paired with the help described in Bucket 1. In mediation and counseling, parents can work together and share safety concerns, as well as create rules, structure and boundaries to keep the child safe.

If you think your child may have been put in danger by the other parent, be careful how you respond with your child. It is important to stay calm while letting your child know you care about their feelings and experiences. Let your child know you're taking care of the problem and reassure them that it's not their fault. For example, you could say, "Thank you for telling me about that. I'm really sorry that happened. I understand why you're upset. I am going to talk to some people who can help me decide the best way to handle this and then I will take care of it and make sure you are safe." But talking badly about the other parent doesn't actually help your child. Children in that situation already feel confused because there is a deep connection with both parents. When you ask your child about what happened, try to avoid asking your child "leading" questions, like "Did \_\_\_ hit you?" These can be seen as planting a story in your child's mind. Instead, ask "open-ended" questions, such as "tell me what happened?" Better yet, leave it to a medical provider or child protection worker to ask the child questions. If child abuse or neglect is suspected, these professionals are required to make a report to Child Protective Service (CPS). If you suspect abuse, you can also call the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline. CPS may open an investigation and send someone to talk with your child. While these may seem like dramatic steps to take, they are sometimes necessary to keep children safe. If your child is found to have experienced abuse, the involvement of CPS and/or the court can help protect your child. The focus will be to make a plan that addresses the problems, so that your child can have safe contact with their other parent if at all possible.

## V. Conclusion

It is not simple or easy to understand and change parent-child contact problems. You may be finding it hard to imagine other ways of doing things. That's completely understandable. Since you are reading this guide, it is clear that you care about your child and want to do something to help.

It can help to get professional support and feedback about how to approach these challenges. While it's good to have loving support from a friend or relative, sometimes these well-intentioned family and friends side with one parent and actually make the problem worse. A professional who understands complicated family dynamics can help get to the real problems and real solutions. A professional does not have a reason to side with one parent over the other, or tell a parent what they want to hear to avoid hurting their feelings. A mediator or family therapist is trained to reduce conflict, encourage healthy communication, and help solve problems.

Again, research shows that children benefit from having safe contact with both parents. The sooner you, your co-parent, and your child, get support, the better the chances are to reduce



damage to your child's mind and self-esteem. Remember, a healthy child becomes a healthy adult.

## **VI. Resources**

### **Therapists:**

When looking for a Family Systems Therapist, you can contact your child's pediatrician, school counselor or your insurance referral service to ask for referrals. You will want to work with a therapist who has experience working with families struggling with co-parenting and parent-child contact problems. In addition to working with a family therapist, it can also be helpful for family members to work with their own therapists for individual support. Consider using videoconference with a non-local practitioner, if necessary, to get a Family Systems-focused practitioner with experience. You can search for family systems therapists in your area at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>. First enter your zip code to get a list of all therapists. Next, select "Types of Therapy" at the top of the list, then "Show More Types of Therapy." From this list, select "Family Systems."

### **On-line programs:**

The High Conflict Institute /New Ways for Families (NWFF) offers an online program. Family Resolution Services offers the NWFF program, along with personal coaching.

<https://www.multco.us/dcj/fcs>

Parenting Beyond Conflict offers skill building, strategies and support towards peaceful co-parenting. Child safety and child development are emphasized. Coaching and co-parent coaching are offered. [www.parentingbeyondconflict.com](http://www.parentingbeyondconflict.com)

### **Books:**

*Overcoming the Alienation Crisis: 33 Co-parenting Solutions* by John Moran and Matthew Sullivan. Parts II and III list specific familiar situations, with guidance on how to approach them.

Your public library- ask a librarian for what you're interested in reading about or resources in your community!

### **Child Abuse Concerns:**

**Oregon Department of Human Services Child Abuse Hotline: (855) 503-SAFE (7233)**

### **Domestic Violence and Safety:**

To find local, confidential domestic violence services go to: [www.ocadsv.org/find-help/](http://www.ocadsv.org/find-help/)

**National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-7233**