

Basic information:

Even the most experienced negotiators find themselves completely unable to resolve some issues. If you've agreed to make parenting decisions together, then you and the other parent must plan for how you will make necessary decisions when you cannot reach agreement on your own.

Part of the problem is understanding the nature of the conflict. In addition to differing views, values, and cultures, people are sometimes driven by jealousy, anger, bitterness, or revenge in these situations. Parents may insist that they have their children's best interests in mind when, in fact, they do not. Often, disagreements between parents are motivated by a desire to improve their own lives rather than to meet the needs of their children. One effective strategy you can use to resolve conflict is to examine your motives.

CAUTION! You can try to "get underneath" a problem by trying to understand why there is a problem in the first place. Mental health professionals are especially skilled at this and can often help parents who regularly battle over certain things to untangle the issues and develop a plan for solving them over the longer term. Regular conflicts over exact pickup and drop-off times, or whether visits over school holidays should start at the end of school on Friday or some other time, may have to do with larger, underlying issues. For example, some parents want to make sure that visitation schedules do not vary more than a few hours one way or the other so that the child support amounts won't change. Other times, parents will refuse to allow a later or earlier pickup time because they want to "teach" the other parent to be on time (in a way that the parent was not during the marriage, for example).

Things to think about:

You have several options for resolving disagreements. As you consider these options, make sure that the option you choose allows for decisions to be made in a timely fashion. Your options include:

- The primary caretaker has authority. If your children will spend significantly more time with one parent than the other, consider giving that parent final authority to make decisions when you otherwise can't agree. Alternatively, you could give one parent final authority on certain issues when you disagree and give the other parent similar authority for different issues. To put some limits on the parent with decision-making authority, you could require that the parent consult with someone whose opinions both parents value, such as a counselor, religious leader, or family member, before making a final decision. Even when parents cannot agree about something, they can often agree on whose advice they will trust and follow.
- Develop temporary agreements. Mistrust lurks around most parenting agreements. Sometimes it helps to take baby steps before trying big ones. Parents fighting over big decisions might try making decisions on simple issues for a short time. Hopefully this will improve their ability to communicate, resolve conflicts, and ultimately make decisions on more controversial questions. For example, you might agree to make decisions about outside activities together for three months before trying to tackle larger decisions. Then you might be ready to make larger decisions, like who will provide after-

school care, and then even larger decisions, like which schools your children will attend.

- Work with a counselor, therapist, or attorney. You can ask for an evaluation of your situation from a trained professional such as a psychiatrist, marriage and family therapist, or other mental health professional. You can accept any recommendation that the evaluator makes, use the recommendation to try and reach an agreement on your own, or bring the recommendation into mediation. Another option is for each of you to consult with an attorney—or meet with one attorney together—to get information. (Be aware that many lawyers refuse to meet with both parties in a divorce dispute.) Many parents want to know “what the law says” before they make a decision.
- Negotiate a Parent A and Parent B plan. This approach involves assigning roles for a particular issue to two hypothetical parents—Parent A and Parent B. Once these roles are assigned, you then decide, based on the situation, which parent is best suited to be Parent A and Parent B. For instance, if you decide that your children should spend Christmas with Parent A and three weeks in the summer with Parent B, you then decide which role is more appropriate for you and the other parent—that is, who would be the better Parent A and who the better Parent B.
- Choose mediation. Many parents select mediation to resolve disputes. When the mediator has no authority to make an independent recommendation to the court, the process allows the parents to maintain control over their decisions. As a result, parents can focus on their children and work on communicating with each other.
- Arbitrate disagreements. A few states allow parents to submit parenting decisions to an arbitrator when they cannot reach agreement on their own. Unlike mediators, arbitrators are decision makers. In arbitration, each parent presents his or her views to the arbitrator, who resolves the issues in dispute.

Solution Ideas:

___ Resolving Disputes When Making Decisions Together.

___ If disagreements arise regarding this Parenting Agreement, we agree to negotiate a temporary agreement while we resolve more difficult issues. This temporary agreement will last:

___ [amount of time]

___ until we reach a final agreement

___ other: _____
_____ [specify].

___ If disagreements arise regarding this Parenting Agreement or our parenting arrangements, we agree as follows [choose all that apply]:

_____ [parent] has authority to make final decisions when we can't agree.

___ Before this parent makes a final decision that resolves a disagreement, he/she will consult with _____ [other adult] for advice.

_____ [parent] has authority to make final decisions regarding _____ [specify] and _____ [other parent] has authority to make final decisions regarding _____ [specify].

_____ We will participate in the following, at either parent's request [choose all that apply]:

_____ counseling/therapy

_____ mediation

_____ arbitration

_____ meeting with attorney(s)

_____ other: _____ [specify]

_____ We further agree that [specify]: