

# WHAT TO TELL THE KIDS ABOUT A HIGH-CONFLICT CO-PARENT

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*Many parents have asked us about how to raise a child or children with a co-parent (whether a spouse, former spouse or unmarried partner) who is “high-conflict.” In other words, the co-parent frequently exhibits some or all of the following:*

- *preoccupied with blaming others (often those closest to him/her, like the child or the other parent – or both)*
- *extreme behaviors (like yelling, hitting spouse or child, making false allegations, spreading rumors, hiding money, and so forth)*
- *all-or-nothing thinking (solutions to problems have to be all their way; they see some people (including themselves) as all-good and others (including you) as all-bad; may see one of his or her children as all-good and the other as all-bad)*
- *unmanaged emotions (screaming, crying, pleading) – but some don’t show this.*

*If you are a parent who is asking this question, it is very important to avoid being accused of “bad-mouthing” the other parent, by speaking negatively about him or her to the children and providing too much information about adult issues, such as a court case. On the other hand, you want to protect your children from the blaming and uncontrolled behavior of the high-conflict co-parent, and to provide the children with coping skills and help them not blame themselves.*

*This article discusses one way parents can deal with both concerns, while helping your children to be resilient throughout their lives.*

## **Teach Four Big Skills (the New Ways for Families® skills)**

Rather than talking to the kids about the “high-conflict” co-parent (and you should never use that term around the children), talk about “four big skills for life.” These skills are:

- flexible thinking
- managed emotions
- moderate behaviors
- checking ourselves to see if we’re using these skills regularly

Tell your kids that these are four big skills that will help them with friends, help them get a good job someday, and may help them be community leaders someday, if they want. These four skills help in any relationship, whether it’s someone you like or someone you don’t like. You can explain this to a child of almost any age, starting at least at age four, if you put it in simple terms.

Then, in daily life you can ask them if they noticed other people who used these skills in solving problems, or if you used any of these four skills in solving a problem. For example: “Did you notice how that guy at the store was frustrated, but he stayed calm and listened to the clerk tell him where to find what he wanted? Would you say he was managing his emotions?”

“Did you notice how that guy on TV was just yelling at a store clerk. Would you say he was managing his emotions? Did he seem to get what he wanted? No, he didn’t. How do you think he could have used managed emotions to help solve his problem?”

An example you could share about yourself: “Today I was real frustrated by sitting still in a traffic jam. But I told myself to think about things I was looking forward to this week – like your birthday party, and seeing my sister, and a movie I want to see someday. I used my flexible thinking and managed my emotions. But it wasn’t easy. I kept having bad thoughts about the other drivers in front of me, but then I chose my happy thoughts again. Did you have any frustrating times today that you dealt with by using your flexible thinking?”

### **Help Your Child Cope with Friends**

Once you’ve started to have these casual discussions with your child, you can teach these skills when they have a conflict with a friend. For example: “Mom/Dad, this kid at school says he hates me! I feel like punching him in the nose! He/she used to be my best friend!”

Then, you could say something like: “Oh, that’s too bad. I remember when that happened to me. I can understand how angry you must have felt. But I’m glad you didn’t punch him/her in the nose. Have you thought of what you can do instead? Maybe you can talk with him/her, after you’ve both calmed down. Try to use your flexible thinking to come up with ideas of what went wrong and how you can solve it.”

You can also do this when conflicts come up between siblings, and especially praise them when they solve their own problems. You could say: “I’m really glad that you both were able to solve this problem on your own. You’re pretty good problem-solvers, especially when you use your flexible thinking like you just did.” Catch them when they’re doing well. (You get more of what you pay attention to.)

### **Help Your Child Cope with Your Co-Parent**

Now, since you have taken an educational approach to teaching these four big skills, you can start using them when things happen with your co-parent. Suppose he or she was unreasonably angry at your child, and the child came to you to complain. Rather than saying that your co-parent is a jerk, you could say: “Remember, some people have a harder time managing their emotions than other people. When you’re ready, let’s do some flexible thinking about ways you might deal with situations like that in the future. In the meantime, we can manage our own emotions, even though some other people can’t.”

By speaking in this “teaching skills” way about the other parent, you avoid “bad-mouthing” him or her, while giving your child skills for resilience. This way, you can’t be blamed for saying anything specifically about your co-parent. Instead, you have kept it as a general lesson and still provided a discussion about what to do in the future in “situations like that.”

By teaching the four big skills for life, your child can learn lessons that will last into adulthood, even during the most difficult times of childhood – including separation and divorce.

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*Bill Eddy is a lawyer, therapist, mediator, and the co-founder and Training Director of the High Conflict Institute, a training and consulting company focused on dealing with difficult people in high-conflict disputes. He has written 13+ [books](#). For more, [www.HighConflictInstitute.com](http://www.HighConflictInstitute.com).*