

# Quick Help for Families in Transition

From the creators of:

[UpToParents.org](http://UpToParents.org) (for divorcing and divorced parents), [WhileWeHeal.org](http://WhileWeHeal.org) (for parents working through marital problems), and [ProudToParent.org](http://ProudToParent.org) (for never-married parents)

Many parents have suggested that we gather into one place the video links, articles, and quotes that come up during the course of the free websites we've developed for families. So, we did it. In this single document you can now see these resources and use them in any way you find helpful. We think they're a good way to grasp:

- The dangers of parent conflict
- Everyone's need for a peaceful relationship between parents
- The myths about separation and divorce that fool so many parents
- The simple skills that help parents succeed.

Here are links to some of our most popular videos:

1. [\*3 Girls' Invisible Pain\*](#) (8:09)
2. [\*12 Thoughts of Children Caught in Conflict\*](#) (2:22)
3. [\*A Daughter Speaks about Survival\*](#) (3:16)
4. [\*9 Myths that Fool Almost Everyone\*](#) (6:16)
5. [\*The Child Safety Zone Pledge\*](#) (6:02)
6. [\*8 Hidden Keys No One Has Told You About\*](#) (6:13)
7. [\*Joint Legal Custody/Lasting Family Peace\*](#) (5:22)

Some important written materials from the website work are collected on the following pages, and here is a link to the [\*Quotes on UpToParents\*](#).

We congratulate you on focusing on your children's needs—and on using that focus to build a better future.

Revised May 20, 2010

## *Lots of Research – Only One Conclusion*

“Without question, the single biggest problem for children of divorce is being exposed to continuing parental conflict.” Edward Teyber, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (1992), p. 79.

“Empirical evidence consistently points to parental conflict as the factor that most consistently predicts maladjustment among children whose parents have separated or divorced.” Robert E. Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Child Custody, and Mediation*. New York: The Guilford Press (1994), p. 13.

“[I]t’s clear that children of all ages regard fighting between parents as their number-one divorce-related problem.” M. Gary Neuman, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House (1998), p. 197.

“High conflict between parents not only causes children immense suffering, it causes serious problems in their development.” Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *What About the Kids?* New York: Hyperion (2003), p. 204.

“Conflict essentially stops kids in their tracks—they are less free to go about the business of being a kid, meeting the developmental tasks that are essential to forming a healthy self.” Mary Ellen Hannibal, *Good Parenting Through Your Divorce*. New York: Marlow and Company (2002), p. 58.

“The thing that stresses children most, sometimes for many years, is lingering conflict between their parents.” Constance Ahrons, *We’re Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say about Their Parents’ Divorce*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers (2004), p. 80.

“Our data show that the long-term consequences of interparental discord for children are pervasive and consistently detrimental . . . [and] have a broad negative impact on virtually every dimension of offspring well-being.” Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1997), p. 219.

“Some parents desperately hold onto the belief that children are not affected by the parents’ conflicts. Sadly, this just isn’t true. Unhappy homes make unhappy children, and every divorce will take its toll unless some corrective steps are taken.” Archibald D. Hart, *Children and Divorce: What to Expect—How to Help*. Dallas: Word Publishing (1982, 1989), p. 121

## 12 Thoughts of Children Caught In Conflict

### 1. “I’m so ashamed. I’m humiliated. Other kids’ families aren’t like this.”

“Children believe they are responsible for all of the major occurrences in their lives—including parental fighting.”—Edward Teyber, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992, p. 82.

### 2. “I’m scared. I don’t know what will happen next.”

“In a home marked by conflict and unpredictability, children do not have a deep and abiding trust in their caretakers.”—Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Intervention with Families in Conflict*. Baltimore: Port City Press, 2000, p.49.

### 3. “I need to fix this. It’s dangerous if I don’t.”

“Having lost the family as a unit, children are apprehensive about the future. . . . [S]ome youngsters feel they have lost any semblance of control over their lives. . . . Their fear and sense of powerlessness are heightened when children witness scenes in which their parents are at each other’s throats.”—Stanton E. Samenow, *In the Best Interest of the Child: How to Protect Your Child from the Pain of Divorce*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002, pp. 19-21.

### 4. “This is MY mom and dad. I must have the faults they see in each other.”

“Parental conflict not only sends kids messages about love, marriage, and relationships, it speaks volumes to them about who they are. To a child’s ears, any comment about his parent—positive or negative—is a judgment of him. Any critical barb about your ex goes right to your child’s heart.”—M. Gary Neuman, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House, 1998, p. 202.

### 5. “I need to figure out who’s right and pick sides.”

“[C]hildren experiencing intense conflict have to take sides because they can’t manage the internal tension and anxiety they feel.”—Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 20.

### 6. “I can’t talk about my real hurt and real fears.”

“Children also find it difficult to talk about sensitive topics and feelings . . . because they fear they might escalate the fight. . . . Instead, some turn inward, trying to make do with their own meager resources.”—Janet Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Caris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997, pp. xiv-xvii

### 7. “I need to tell people what they want to hear.”

“In the battle between you, they learn to be polished diplomats. They’ll tell each of you what you want most to hear—not because they’re liars but because they want desperately to soothe each of you, to calm you down, to reduce their fears that you’ll become enraged. They’re afraid of your anger, they pity you, and they want you to feel better.”—Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *What About the Kids?* New York: Hyperion, 2003, p. 204.

### 8. “I will make one parent angry (or hurt) if I need or love my other parent.”

“In divorce . . . the choices that are put before children do not lead to a sense of control. Rather, they often lead to the child being placed in a position of feeling like they are betraying one parent or the other (or both).”—Jeffrey Zimmerman and Elizabeth S. Thayer, *Adult Children of Divorce: How to Overcome the Legacy of Your Parents’ Breakup and Enjoy Love, Trust, and Intimacy*. Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2003, p 61.

### 9. “If I weren’t here, this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Because they are often the centerpiece of their parents’ arguments with each other, to varying degrees, these children feel responsible for causing the disputes, yet must feel helpless to control or stop the conflict.”—Janet Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Caris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997

### 10. “I can’t do anything right. I deserve whatever bad happens to me.”

“Children in high-conflict homes are more likely to view themselves . . . in overly negative and hostile ways.”—E. Mark Cummings and Patrick Davies, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994, p.5

### 11. “I’d do anything to feel better or to fit in.”

“Conflicts between parents are likely to cause self-destructive behaviors in children.”—Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 25.

### 12. “I don’t care anymore. It hurts too much to care. The world doesn’t care about me—and I don’t care about the world.”

“Ongoing postdivorce conflict reinforces the child’s belief that bad things will continue to happen to him or her in the future and that he or she is helpless to do anything about it.”—Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Intervention with Families in Conflict*. Baltimore: Port City Press, 2000, p. 197.

## *9 Myths that Fool Almost Everyone*

<b>Myth</b>	<b>Truth</b>
#1: “We have a competition.”	Almost always in divorce, parents either win together or lose together. Parents’ common interests remain common after separation.
#2: “We have legal problems.”	Nearly all issues in divorce are Mom-and-Dad issues. Parents and kids are badly hurt when parent issues are miscast as legal ones.
#3: “We have a custody dispute.”	Almost no couples have an actual custody dispute; instead, much like married couples, they have decisions and schedules to resolve, not labels to over.
#4: “The judge will solve the problem.”	Judges’ decisions don’t solve a family’s problems; in fact, resorting to court almost always leaves parents, children, and families more fractured.
#5: “This is complicated.”	The emotional challenges are great, but the answer is parents’ simple focus on their children’s needs. Building peace for kids is parents’ best light out of their own hurt.
#6: To protect my children, I must fight.	The fight can’t protect children because the fight is precisely what’s hurting the children. Success, therefore, isn’t winning a fight; it’s ending a fight.
#7: “Focusing on my children will hurt me.”	Far from hurting parents, focusing on the children’s need for family cooperation is the best predictor of a parent’s good outcome. Protecting kids protects parents.
#8: “I’m not sad, just mad.”	Many parents hurt themselves by choosing a dangerously destructive battle to try to avoid their deep hurt. Grief must be faced, not camouflaged with anger or conflict.
#9: “We’ll have no relationship.”	Parents’ good relationship will always be important to their children. If both parents want, they can even work on staying married. But even if divorced, they’re good co-parenting relationship is essential.

## ***Child Safety Zone Pledge for Our Children***

***Children have no defense  
against their parents' anger.  
--Dr. Ross Campbell***

### *The Philosophy of a Child Safety Zone:*

There are about 10,000 minutes in a week, and on average most children of divorce see their parents together for about 4 of those minutes. This leaves the parents about 9,996 minutes when they can talk about any topic, no matter how difficult or emotional. Is it really selfish for the children to ask that the 4 minutes when they see their parents together be consistently peaceful?

***Because these times together are so brief, all parents can give their children the gift of decent interaction during these times.***

### *Our Pledge to Our Children:*

We now agree that all times when our children see us together or hear us speaking ***belong to our children***. They make up their ***Child Safety Zone*** and are entirely for meeting their needs, including especially their need to see us act as responsible adults in a partnership for them. They are not for conflict or dealing with any difficult issues.

***Other children receive this gift from their parents, and our children are no less deserving.***

From today forward, we each give our children the gift of this ***Child Safety Zone***. Regardless of what my co-parent does or how I think I've been treated, I will always speak and act as a courteous and responsible adult during:

- All pick-ups and drop-offs.
- All other times our children see us together.
- All telephone conversations when our children know we're speaking.

With this agreement each of us will have the benefit of knowing that our children will be safer and happier—and that we can approach all family encounters confident of a civil time.

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Signature and date

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Signature and date

## ***8 Hidden Keys No One Has Told You About***

Here are 8 things (or as we call them 8 Hidden Keys) virtually all separated and divorced parents can use to protect their children and to build a better future. And best of all, (1) they're free, (2) they can be used immediately, and (3) they can be used regardless of what one's co-parent is doing.

1. Observing the Child Safety Zone
2. Keeping your children out of adult roles
3. Sharing 10 good things about their other parent
4. Celebrating what they get to do with their other parent
5. Cheerfully encouraging calls to their other parent
6. Promptly sharing child-related information
7. Staying out of unnecessary legal combat
8. Enjoying and admiring your children

# *Joint Legal Custody, Lasting Family Peace*

*In Joint Legal Custody, separated and divorced parents make the major decisions concerning their children's upbringing in the same cooperative way that happily married parents do.*

## **Introduction**

“Joint legal custody” (JLC) should be the goal of all separated and divorced parents peaceful and mature enough to focus together on their children. It represents the respectful cooperation that can help children and parents alike when parents are separated or divorced.

***An important word of caution:*** JLC should not be used in certain cases. If there is risk of violence in a family or a current pattern of unpredictable, unsafe, or degrading behavior on the part of one or both parents, great caution should be taken before JLC is considered. JLC requires that parents have a peaceful, predictable, and respectful relationship with each other.

## **Understanding Joint Legal Custody**

This is the simplest and best way to understand JLC: ***In JLC, separated and divorced parents make the major decisions concerning their children's upbringing in the same cooperative way that happily married parents do.*** And because separated parents with JLC are raising children between two homes, they actually commit themselves to *even better* communication and cooperation than is necessary between married couples living under the same roof.

Matters calling for joint resolution include ones of education, religious upbringing, medical and counseling care, and schedules. But they can also involve any issue either of the parents thinks is important enough to merit their joint input—discipline, curfews, allowance, extracurricular activities, diet, even matters of dress and body adornment (want your child tattooed without a chance to be heard?). A good rule of thumb is this: ***Just like in a happy marriage, if one of the parents thinks a child matter is serious enough for the parents to speak and act together, then the parents speak and act together; neither parent acts alone on these matters.***

Here, then, are some basic features of JLC.

1. The parents maturely separate any personal disappointments with each other from their children's need for a courteous and cooperative partnership between the parents; the parents focus on their future co-parenting partnership, not their past personal relationship.
2. The parents respect and support each other's relationships with their children.
3. The parents treat each other as partners rather than competitors, and they treat their differing opinions as assets rather than obstacles.
4. Parents promptly share all important child information. When child issues arise, the parents seek each other's opinions, discuss options, and then make decisions together. They value the different perspectives each brings to their children's lives.

5. The parents respect that there will be differences in the ways their households run and in the ways they relate with their children. They may share opinions about such differences, but they don't try to make the other household run exactly their way.

6. If necessary, the parents reach out for the counseling, mediation, or other help that will make their joint parenting work. Like happily married parents, they work things out; they do not make unilateral decisions, and they do not take issues to court.

The contrast is quite stark between parental interaction (a) in happy marriages and JLC on the one hand and (b) in competitive separations on the other.

<u>In Happy Marriages and in JLC</u>	<u>In Competitive Separations</u>
Child needs put first	Parent resentments put first
Child information shared openly	Child information withheld
Opinions heard respectfully	Opinions discounted or ignored
Important child decisions made together	Important child decisions made alone
Separate parenting styles respected	Separate parenting styles demeaned
Unconcerned with small stuff	Preoccupied with small stuff
Co-parent seen as an asset and a partner	Co-parent seen as obstacle or competitor

### **Conclusion: Some Reasons to Make Joint Legal Custody Work**

The rewards to children and parents from a good JLC relationship are tremendous.

**Children**, who are already hurt by all the painful losses that go with their parents' separation, can at least have parents who make and implement decisions together—*and* children can see that their parents have remained a team for them.

**Parents** are also rewarded. They know that they'll be included whenever vital child-related decisions are being made. They know they'll never find themselves in an expensive and embarrassing court battle over what are properly parent questions. And above all, they know they are giving their children the gift of a cooperative, respectful, and predictable relationship between the two most important people in their lives.

For peaceful and mature parents, the rewards from grasping JLC and, if necessary, reaching out for counseling to help it succeed, can truly justify the effort.

Charlie Asher

## ***10 Earmarks of a Successful Family Transition***

1. Parents' focus is always the kids and the future. (*"If parents will agree on one thing, they'll agree on everything, if that one thing is, 'What do we want our children to look like when they're 25?'"*—Pat Brown.) They see that building peace for their children helps everyone.
2. Parents recognize that their conflict is a source of deep pain and serious danger for their children—and thus that their new peaceful and courteous relationship is essential.
3. Parents sincerely support their children's contact and good relationships with both parents. They are friends to their children's relationships with both parents.
4. Parents discard competition and embrace cooperation. They realize they have one scorecard, their fragile children's well-being, and they score well by reducing conflict, building cooperation, making good decisions together, and saving money.
5. Parents constantly observe the 8 *Hidden Keys*, things they can do immediately, for free, and regardless of what one's co-parent is doing.
  - Living by the Child Safety Zone.
  - Keeping their children out of adult roles.
  - Sharing with them 10 good things about their other parent.
  - Celebrating what their children get to do with their other parent.
  - Cheerfully encouraging their calls to their other parent.
  - Promptly sharing child-related information.
  - Staying out of unnecessary legal combat.
  - Enjoying and admiring their children.
6. Decisions about separating are just that—decisions. Each parent arrives at his or her position soberly but also accepts the other's position. They work on their marriage if both are willing, but they grieve and move on if one partner is unwilling to commit to the marriage.
7. Parents honestly and courageously address their grief and do the hard work of creating a nonintimate businesslike relationship. Parents use whatever counseling or other help they need, singly or together, to do so.
8. The new relationship is characterized by transparent, trust-building interaction, addressing problems together and without blame. "Mom isn't the problem, and Dad isn't the problem; the problem is the problem, and we address it together." There is a lot of cooperation and very little intrigue.
9. Everything passes through this test: will this statement, action, or position help our children? Will it help minimize their already enormous losses? Will it reduce their hurt today and increase their chances of broad success tomorrow?
10. Parents teach their "tribes" (close family and friends, new partners, etc.) this new way of relating (often using their Agreed Commitments from UpToParents.org).