

[Back to Spring 2020 issue](#)

Psychological Aspects of Custody Disputes in The Time of Novel Coronavirus

DR. ROBERT SIMON

When the corona virus pandemic hit, Angela and Tony's co-parenting relationship became even more stressed. Divorced three years ago even while married, these parents had more than their fair share of disagreement about how to raise their two children now 7 and 9. They disagreed about activities for the kids, about appropriate behavioral limits for the kids and about roles for the children within the family system. Since COVID-19 became a part of the landscape of our lives, Angela and Tony's conflict has increased to where Angela is threatening not to permit the children to be in Tony's home because she believes that they are not safe there. She fears that when the children are with their father, his approach to the virus might cause them to become exposed to the virus. She also worries that Tony isn't structured enough regarding their schooling which now is at home.

We have now lived for approximately two months with the reality of coronavirus in our midst. So much is in flux. The threat of illness is ever-present. Not knowing what the future will look like is hard – we can't plan and we can't realistically anticipate. A great deal has changed and probably there remains a great deal more change ahead. Two months later, the shock has worn off and the "new normal" feels more "normal" yet things continue to change and we, as a society, continue to have little sense of what the future holds and how the virus will change our lives in the short run and the long run. We have settled down yet we haven't. We are stressed and when people are stressed, they are more prone to relying on their least effective coping skills and on falling back into old patterns of perceiving and behaving. For the families we work with, this means that disputes between parents about their children are likely to be fueled by the stressed of the pandemic. Also, when we as adults feel a loss of control (and who isn't feeling a loss of control at this time), we seek to find avenues and ways to control the things we can.

In separated/divorced/re-configured families that have conflict related to the children, their care, parenting and child-sharing, the pandemic creates more difficulty and disagreement. Parents who have conflict about caring for children are likely to have renewed arguments about the well-being of children, especially since children, too, are at home. Disputes about the children's schooling and parental responsibility/participation in schooling are likely. Disputes about how much social distancing is important and what precautions need to be

taken inside and outside the home are more likely. Parents who experience their co-parent as less structured and laxer are likely to perceive even more of these traits in their co-parent, particularly given there is the real possibility of serious illness and even death when protections and mitigation fail. And, if parents mistrust one another to begin with or see one another in broadly negative ways, it is all but inevitable that differences in how the parents approach things like monitoring children's schooling or social distancing will be magnified.

It is well known that conflict between parents, especially conflict about the children, is a source of great stress and risk for children. More than ever children need safe, secure and reliable relationships with both parents. Conflict between parents disrupts this. With so much change, fear and uncertainty everywhere, children's well-being will be promoted by making a conscious effort to reduce conflict. This may mean tolerating something that you don't like or not saying something to your co-parent that you'd like to say. Doing this may be especially difficult right now since when we feel out of control, we seek to control things external to us. This means respecting your child's time in your co-parent's care unless there is a true, tangible and immediate threat to your child's well-being. It also helps to be aware the different people respond to stress in different ways – there is no one right way. Thus, being sensitive to your co-parent's stress and stress level can be helpful and will likely de-escalate conflict. When it comes to kids, the more stressed you are, the more stressed they'll be. So, take the time to be aware of what you're going through since this will help you focus on your children's feelings. Work to being attuned to your child's feelings, fears and worries about the pandemic, work to validate their feelings (even if you don't agree with them) and letting your kids know how much you value their being open with you. When your co-parent sees that the children return from your care in good spirits, this can help diminish their concern about the differences in how you parent which, in turn, will further support your children.

Angela and Tony are fortunate in that they have worked with a co-parent therapist during the pandemic. They were on the brink of major legal action with Angela threatening to withhold the children and seek full custody. However, their willingness to look at their common interest – their children – and seek ways of diminishing the children's level of stress in uncertain times, helped create children whose coping increased which, in turn, reassured each parent.

[Back to Spring 2020 issue](#)