

CP Cal TIPS

How to Help Your Clients Parent by Agreement

Divorcing families can repair trust between parents by keeping their agreements.

Most parents considering divorce have lost the ability to communicate effectively, goodwill is gone and trust is often obliterated. Clients feel frustrated, isolated and hopeless. However, creating a financial settlement and parenting plan is needed, but difficult, without three essential elements: 1) Communication, 2) goodwill, and 3) trust. Collaborative professionals can help parents identify what is important, to listen carefully, and to make agreements that are clear and specific.

Fortunately, with the help of a Collaborative Team, clients can look forward to rebuilding trust in the following ways:

Help Clients Formulate a Mission Statement

Mission statements help focus clients on what's important to them, especially when it comes to their children. It centers them around shared family values. A mission statement is helpful when making agreements gets tough, because it can help the clients refocus on what's important to them.

- Start each meeting by reviewing the Mission Statement.
- Review it whenever the clients aren't sure about a specific proposal.
- Ask them if it is consistent with their Mission Statement.

Teach clients how to make agreements

If you say "YES" it means:

- 1) You agree, you can live with the agreement and will follow through.
- 2) Make the agreement specific. Who will do what, where, when and how.
- 3) Some agreements may be time limited. For example, "We agree to leave the children alone in our homes for 1 hour without adult supervision. When they are ____ years old we will revisit this." For time limited agreements be sure to include when and how the agreement will be reviewed.

4) Don't say yes, if you don't mean it. It will erode trust when you change your mind later on. If you're not sure, say "I need to think about it."

If you say "MAYBE," it means:

"I will think about it, research it, etc., and will get back to you with my decision" by a specific time and date.

If you say "NO" it means:

"This doesn't make sense to me," or "This doesn't work for me." The other parent may hear you calling them or their idea stupid. So focus on "I" statements. Propose something that will work for you. Try to find common ground. Try not to say "no" without having something else in mind.

Avoid prefacing your rejection of the other parent's idea with "It's not in the children's best interests." Instead, say "From my perspective..."

Once an agreement is reached:

Be very specific. Address who will do what, where, when and how. This is essential to a successful agreement that you can both honor. Keeping your agreements rebuilds trust. That's why it is so important to only agree when you believe you can keep the agreement. Write it down carefully - don't rely on your memory. Stress and memory don't work well together!

Repairing Inevitable Errors

Mistakes will happen, someone will be late or unable to keep an agreement now and then. If you break an agreement by accident or out of necessity, contact the other parent and be accountable. Try to be understanding of any occasional break down in the agreement or communication by one or the other. If a certain part of the agreement just isn't working, renegotiate something that will work for both of you.

Going forward, "Parenting by Agreement" will become the new normal.