



PARENT EDUCATION

This information is for educational purposes only. If you have questions about child development or parent education, please contact a professional in that area of expertise. If you have legal questions about custody, please consult with an attorney.

Now that you have a better understanding of what mediation is, I am going to share some parenting information that will help you with your next steps. All parents need support and information from time to time – and this can be one of those times.

The information we'll be talking about next is for educational purposes only. This information is designed to prepare you for mediation. If you need legal advice, please consult an attorney. We will be referring to the Parent Education booklet throughout this session. It's available at nccourts.gov

Overview

- What children need in general and how you can help them
- Tips for improving communication
 - with your children
 - with the other parent
- How unresolved, lingering, or out-of-control conflict impacts children
- Strategies for healthy co-parenting

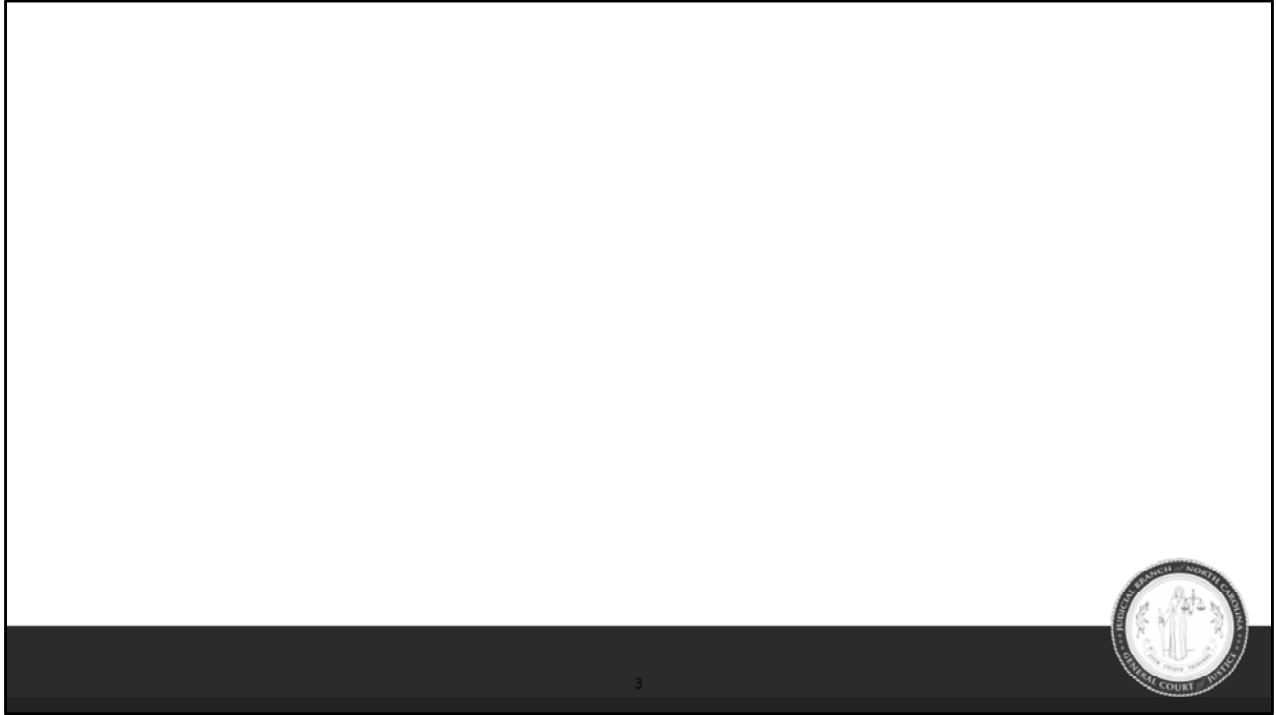


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Here's an outline of what we will be covering together:

- what children need in general and how you can help them
- tips for improving communication
- how conflict impacts children and
- some strategies for healthy co-parenting

All of these things will help you as you move forward to mediation. I am going to play a video that gets right to some of these points. This video is short – just 12 minutes - and has been created expressly for parents going through custody mediation. After the video I will take some time to review key points.

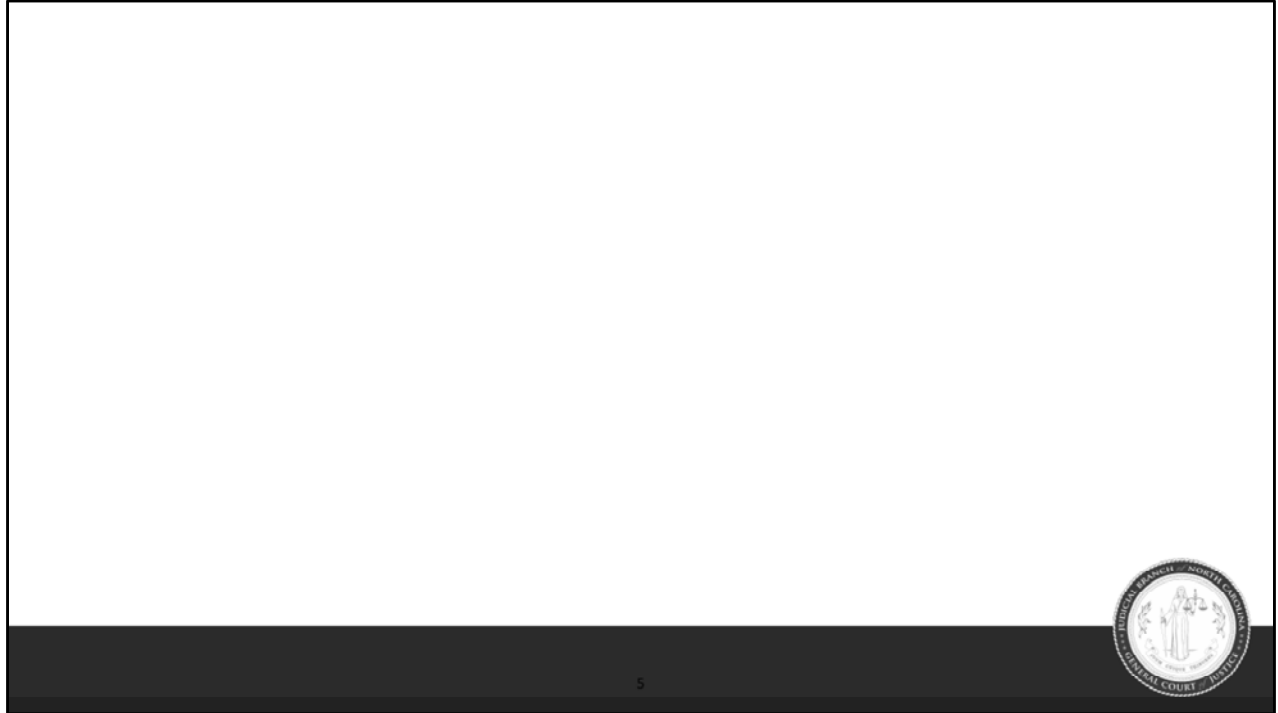


What do you want most for your children?



During the next few minutes, we will focus on some things you can do to help your children. Some of what we will cover, you may already be doing. Some may be new ideas. Some of what is said may be very different from the advice you hear from friends or family.

Let's start with an activity: Please open your booklet to page 4, exercise 1. Take a few minutes to think about this question.



We all want what is best for our children -- What do you want for your child?

Right now?

Five years from now?

When they are adults?

Take a couple minutes to think about these questions and write your answers.

These lists are meant to help guide you as you come up with a parenting plan for your children.

What is Family?



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One of the first things for us to review from the video is how children define FAMILY.

What did you hear from the children in this video?

Children define FAMILY as the people they care about.

Their view is often wider and more generous than some of our own views of family.

"When I remember I am not raising a child,
but raising an adult, then I get it right."
– Debra Winger



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There is so much to consider as parents.

When we feel overwhelmed, you may find Debra Winger's quote helpful –

"When I remember I am not raising a child, but raising an adult, then I get it right."

Priorities

Focus of ...	Parents going through Custody Mediation	Children
Spending time together	Amount of time	Quality of the experiences
Connection	Securing a one-on-one connection with their children	Connection with as many caring people as possible



Generally speaking, parents going through custody mediation are often more focused on amounts of time and securing their one-on-one connection with the children.

Children are often more focused on the quality of experiences and connecting with as many caring people as possible.

These differences are natural. It's helpful to remember them as you make plans with your children's needs in mind.

What Children Need

- Safe
- Accepted
- Stable



Rebecca is the parent educator in the video. She listed at least three things that children need. Do you recall what some of them were?

It's important as you move forward with a parenting plan to think about what you can control to help your children feel safe, accepted, and stable.

Let's look at each of these.

Safe

Children need their parents to take equal responsibility for their care, support, and safety.

- Mistreatment of a former or current partner or spouse is not safe parenting
- Exposing children to violence is harmful to them
- Children should not witness their parents being verbally or physically abusive

Serious safety concerns need to be addressed **before** people can be expected to successfully cooperate as co-parents.

*Please advise your mediator of any serious safety concerns.



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Children rely on their parents for care, support and safety.

Sometimes one or both parents will engage in behavior that is harmful, rather than supportive for their children. Part of your mediator's job is to assess whether mediation is appropriate for your family.

If you have safety concerns, you need to speak to your mediator.

If you have an attorney, you need to speak with your attorney as well.

Serious safety concerns need to be addressed BEFORE people can be expected to successfully cooperate as co-parents.

Accepted



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How do we show acceptance?

Body language is one way and there is also verbal communication.

We show our children that we accept and value them through what and how we communicate with them.

It's not a coincidence that so much of the video focuses on COMMUNICATION, particularly listening. We will talk more about tips for improving communication as we move on.

Stable

How can YOU provide stability
when your children are with you?



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Many parents in your situation have a lot of questions about how to provide stability and consistency for children who travel between two or more homes.

One important way you provide stability is by ensuring that your children can rely upon regular time with both parents.

There are many different and important environments – or places – that your children move between. Can you name some of them?

Consistency within Each Environment



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A few examples of different places could be school, relatives' homes, extra-curricular activities, or camps.

Children can adapt to being in these different environments and can learn to follow different rules for each place.

One point Rebecca made about stability is that it's important for things to be stable and consistent within those environments. For example, the rules at school are different than the ones at Mom's house. And Mom's rules may be different from the rules at Dad's house.

Think about what you can make stable in your individual home so the children have consistency while they are there. Think about routines, bedtime, mealtime.

Also consider what you can do to help your children move between these homes and environments in the easiest, least disruptive way possible.

All Transitions are Stressful to Some Degree



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It's important to know that ALL transitions are stressful to some degree.

For example, when children first arrive at school, they are transitioning to a new place. That is when teachers often notice disruptions, acting out behavior, and so on. Many teachers understand the need to acknowledge the transition to school and come up with special ways to settle the class down and start the day on the right foot. Of course, that example is in a school setting.

What can you do to help your children transition between homes? Take a minute to list your ideas.

The lists may vary depending on the developmental stage of your child. Some children will need more notice that transition is about to happen and need more help making sure that their activity is coming to an end.

In the video, Kamrin advised parents to sit and talk with their children as they are packing up to leave for the other parent's home. He understands the need for help during the transition.

What if children don't want to go to the other house?

- Possible reasons
 - Being in the middle of an activity
 - Being worried about you when they leave
 - Rules are more/less lenient
 - Feeling stressed
 - Feeling your stress
 - Still adjusting to life in two homes
- If there are no safety concerns, most parents want their children to be able to move between parents' homes willingly and happily.
- What can you do to improve the transition experience for your children?



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There are a lot of reasons children may not want to go to the other house. It could be that the child is in the middle of an activity, or worries about you when they leave. The child could feel stressed or is feeling your stress, or is still adjusting to life in two homes. It's not unusual for parents to need help sorting out these reasons.

Your mediator will help you explore improving communication with the other parent. Sometimes there are "no contact" domestic violence protective orders in place or some other factor that needs to be addressed before other steps can happen.

If there are no safety concerns, most parents want their children to be able to move between the parents' homes willingly and happily. Is that on your list of goals? Think about what can you do to improve that experience for your children.

Connecting with Your Child



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Some of you are trying to establish a relationship or reconnect with children you may not have seen in a while. You may not see an immediate reaction to your efforts to connect with them through phone calls, emails, or even during visits. But keep trying!

Children will notice if you give up or aren't consistent. Establishing or re-establishing a relationship often takes time, but it can be successful with thoughtful planning. There are resources to help you listed on the last page of your Parent Education booklet. There are people who can help you with this process right in your county.

Another key to providing stability for your children involves positive information sharing and positive communication between the parents – or caregivers – who are raising the children. Let's discuss some ways to improve your communication skills with your child and the other parent.

Listening is Key for Communication

Listening does not mean agreeing.

Listening means you are

- Receiving
- Allowing space for the person speaking
- Connecting with the speaker, even when you disagree with what they are saying

Without good listening there can be no real communication.



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Active listening is when the listener fully concentrates, understands, responds and then remembers what is being said.

Many people make the mistake of thinking that listening to each other means agreeing. BUT listening does NOT mean agreeing.

Listening DOES mean you are receiving information, allowing space for the person speaking, and connecting with the speaker, even when you disagree with what they are saying.

Without good listening, there can be no real communication.

Parent to Child

- Give children space to express themselves
- Give ourselves space to check our response
- Show children they are important
- Lower the emotion in the room



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Let's start with communication, parent to child.

Children need to feel that they are being heard during times of uncertainty and stress. When children feel connected to the people they love, a lot of the turmoil and stress they are feeling is reduced.

Remember that children express grief and stress in ways that look different from adults. It's important to understand the developmental stages of children and how this affects the kinds of conversations you will have with them. Developmental stages were mentioned during custody mediation orientation and we've included a list of them in your booklet as well.

Rebecca mentioned that children want to be heard. When they feel heard, they feel acknowledged and cared about. That's all part of the need for acceptance.

Listening



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What are some ways in general that we all show we are listening?

It's not always easy to listen when your child is saying something that is hard for you to hear. You may find that you want to interrupt, to jump in and ask questions, or defend yourself.

By listening first – we give the child some space to express themselves and feel accepted,
--we give ourselves the space to check our response and not overreact
--we show our child they are important, and
--we lower the emotion in the room because when the speaker feels heard, they don't have to dig in or say it louder

Communicating is hard in the best of situations. Communicating when there is tension in the family is really hard.

Practice the Pause

- When in doubt, pause.
 - When angry, pause.
 - When tired, pause.
 - When worried, pause.
- And when you pause, **just breathe.**



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What tip did Rebecca give us to help with listening first and not just reacting? Practice a pause. An intentional pause along with something like “tell me more”...if that’s appropriate. The “tell me more” is not about investigating what happened. “Tell me more” is one way to show your child you want to hear, you want to connect with them - you invite them to continue.

It’s so important to understand that listening doesn’t mean agreeing. You really can accept and receive what someone is saying and still disagree with what they are saying. Practice this in easy settings before practicing it in a challenging setting.

Remember when Rebecca talked with the mother whose daughter wanted to spend more time with her, and the son who wanted to spend more time with his father? She encouraged the mom to spend time listening to her children’s feelings WITHOUT making it an “either or” situation and without turning it into an investigation. There was a solution that didn’t involve changing the schedule.

Parent to Parent



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Communicating with the other parent is something you will be doing until your child has reached adulthood and perhaps even beyond that. Finding a way to communicate without conflict will help you and your child in the years to come. There are many ways to do this. For example

- Calm down before speaking, emailing, texting, or calling -- and be mindful of your tone
- Prioritize and handle one issue at a time
- Focus on the current and future needs of the children without bringing in the past
- Leave ALL other issues between parents for a separate conversation so that this channel is always open for parenting information and not mixed with tension

Finally, create a rough draft first for anything you text or write

Honest Communication



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Honest communication does NOT mean you share all details. Ask yourself these questions and remember - You cannot un-say something.

--Is it really appropriate to share these details with my children?

--Will this information help my children? How?

--Why do I want them to know these details?

Be aware of unintentional messages you give to your children. Does your list of goals for your children include their happiness?

"I'm going to miss you when you're gone" can send a stressful message. Your children may worry about you. Remember the video where the girl says, I was happy once I knew my parents were going to be happy. Instead of saying "I'm going to miss you," Try something that helps your children navigate this experience of moving between homes. How about - "I love you and will see you on Sunday. Have a good time."

Do you recall what Rebecca said about negative messages? They damage the children's self-esteem. For example: "You're just like your father/ mother" and "Your father/ mother is (then fill in the blank with whatever negative thing you think about the other parent)." These comments hurt your children even if the comment is "true". It's better to find another adult to share your feelings with when your children aren't present.

Be Positive; Be Aware of Loyalty Issues



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Be positive when speaking to the children about the other parent. Try to separate your experience and relationship with the other parent from your children's experience and relationship with the other parent. As parents who want what is best for their children, you are working to help them have healthy and safe relationships with all of their family members.

Be aware of loyalty issues – Do you unintentionally put your child in the middle? Do you unintentionally want your child to pick you?

It is possible to maintain your connection with your children in a harmonious way even when they are with the other parent. You can discuss how to do this in mediation. You will want to find a way to do this that supports your children and honors their time with the other parent. You do not want to engage in testing loyalty or upsetting children when they are with the other parent.

*Don't worry that children never listen to you;
worry that they are always watching you.*

– Robert Fulghum



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Please turn to page 12 in your booklet and complete Exercise 3.

Let's talk about conflict and its impact on stability for children. Conflict between parents can be frightening.

- Children watch their parents to learn when to be scared, particularly in unfamiliar situations. This is not unique to children. For example, someone not used to flying will watch frequent travelers and flight staff. When frequent travelers and flight staff are calm, it calms a nervous traveler.
- Even though it may appear to you that your children are asleep or watching TV they can often still hear your conversations.

Research shows that even very young children are impacted greatly by parental conflict. Infants can feel the stress and tension you carry, with long term consequences to their health.

Children learn about managing conflict from watching others. How do you want your children to manage conflicts when they are adults? What behavior can you adopt now to model for them?

Children need at least one calm parent. Don't use the excuse that the other parent is behaving badly as an excuse to do the same; Turn the other cheek in front of your children; Stay away from hot button issues; Make a note of times when conflict could arise around your children and ways to reduce this.

How Conflict Impacts Children

- Fear
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Higher risk of health problems
- Disturbed sleep

Results in

- Poor interpersonal skills
- Poor problem solving abilities
- Poor social competence
- Difficulty in focusing and succeeding at school

Children show distress when their parents fight.

The high-conflict relationship of one couple can produce other negative relationships in the next generation.



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Studies have shown that the way parents handle conflict affects their children's future emotional adjustment. In other words, a negative home environment can instill emotional insecurity and adjustment problems for the long haul. During the study, researchers identified two conflicts which affect children most -- hostility and indifference. Because the study used "representative community samples," the researchers believe that their findings are true for most American families.

In addition, "children from high-conflict homes are more likely to have poor interpersonal skills, problem solving abilities, and social competence." Those problems negatively impact their romantic relationships in adolescence and adulthood, as conflicts cause children to "perceive themselves and their social worlds more negatively" and to "have more negative pictures or internal representations of family relationships." This is how the high-conflict relationship of one couple can produce other negative relationships in the next generation.

Develop a Supportive Relationship with Child

You (parents) are the ones who need to make decisions for your children, discipline your children, and guide your children.

Do

Don't

Help support your child

Try to control children's emotions

Work to support healthy relationships

Try to control their relationship with the other parent

Ensure access to one another

Deny access



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Remember, you are the parent – you make decisions for your children, discipline your children, and guide your children.

Even though you can't control your child's emotions, you can help support them.

You can't control their relationship with the other parent but you can help ensure access to one another and work to support healthy relationships.

Healthy Co-parenting



Co-parenting is not a competition.

It's a collaboration of two homes working together with the best interest of the child at heart.

Work for your kids, not against them.

-- Heather Hechler



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Take a moment to turn to page 11 of your handbook and consider Exercise 2.

It's important to find specific ways to share information about your children without conflict.

Be clear what information each of you would like to have and when you will exchange it.
For example:

Health information - updates, concerns, needs.

School information – achievements, events, challenges.

Or Habits, hobbies, friends, and interests.

It's better to communicate directly with the other party, not through your child because
Children experience the pressure of remembering the message and
Children experience the impact of seeing the reaction to the message

Develop a Businesslike Relationship with Co-Parent

- Use common courtesy
- Stay focused on the present.
- Do not rehash the past.
- Keep your children's best interest in mind.
- Strive to keep conflict to a minimum.
- When communication is necessary use a third party to assist if safety is a concern.
 - Do NOT use your child as a messenger!



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In the video, you heard children define “family” as the people who care about them.

You care more about your children than any of us in the court system ever will. Your job as the leaders in their family is to make the family work as well as it can for your children's sake.

I encourage you to think of co-parenting as a job and to focus on the business you share of raising a child or children. This business can probably function better than it is now. Mediation will help you come up with a detailed plan to do just that.

Circle of Control

- What you think
- What you say
- How you react



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While so much may seem out of control, there is much that is in your control.

Remember at the end of the video, when Rebecca encourages the parents to think about what they can control? She says that children learn what you think of them every moment of every time they are with you. They are always noticing your actions and reactions. What children see is so much more important than what they hear about you.

Your actions and reactions are things you can control. You can decide where you turn for the support you need. Seek out support from adult friends and family, not your child.

Please turn to page 14 and complete Exercise 4 --Make a list of some of the ways you can react that will be helpful to your children's wellbeing long-term.

NEXT STEPS

- Revisit goals for your children
 - Anything you want to add?
 - How will your children benefit from reaching these goals?
 - Advice to yourself now and in the future?
- Mediate
 - Discuss details of how you can create an environment where your children move through transitions with greater ease
- Cultivate a long-range view

Ultimately, raise healthy adults who have healthy, happy and strong bonds with all of the important people in their lives.



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Look back at the goals you listed for your child as an adult. Did you capture everything?

In mediation you will discuss the details of HOW you can create an environment where your children move with greater ease between your homes and benefit from the people who care about them most.

In most cases, when you invest in your children's healthy relationship with the other parent, you are also investing in their healthy bond with you. Surprised?! It's true. It takes a long-range view to see that. A long-range view is not an easy view to cultivate when you are upset with the other parent or in the midst of a custody dispute.

The point of parent education is to help you understand ALL of the ingredients that go into raising healthy adults who have healthy, happy and strong bonds with all of the important people in their lives.



Remember, if there are issues of domestic violence, substance abuse, or other safety concerns, you should talk with your mediator, attorney, the Department of Social Services, or law enforcement.

Thank you for considering this information. You can provide stability for your children by much more than just scheduling the time they spend with each of you. Stability involves consistency in your own homes, help with transitions between homes, positive information sharing as parents, and how you manage your own conflict.