

Co-Parenting After Divorce: Double Binds and a Difficult Co-Parent

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies [Co-Parenting with an Emotionally Immature Parent](#) | [Staying Oriented Within Unstable Relationships](#) and [Double Binds in Co-Parenting After Divorce](#) at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com. Search “emotionally immature parent” on the site to find the first, and “double binds” for the second.

Some co-parenting conflicts have no right answer, because both parents want the same limited time for real reasons. Others repeat because a simple request, a bedtime or a small adjustment, does not stay contained. This worksheet separates the two, matches effort to what the system can actually do, and keeps attention on what we can steady: our own orientation and the stability our children find with us. It describes patterns in the interaction, area by area, and makes no verdict about the other parent. A few words per space is enough.

PART ONE

Is this a double bind?

Both parents can be right about their own suffering, and there is still one child and one stretch of time. Degrees of pain cannot be compared or adjudicated. The parenting plan is the decision rule agreed in a calmer phase, and we show compassion for the double bind by respecting it.

| *The plan says ____, and I return to it.*

PART TWO

What movement is available

Where some reflection and repair happen, communication stays useful and structure can be built gradually. Where corrections land as threat and boundaries bring escalation, we reduce engagement there and let structure do the organizing.

| *What has happened when tension entered this area?*

PART THREE

The drift

As volatility becomes predictable, the system reorganizes around it. We soften language, delay requests, choose timing, and carry more than we should.

| *What have I started carrying that is not mine?*

PART FOUR

Islands and capacity

Children benefit from stable points of reference. We build them where we have influence, protect our own capacity, and let some issues stay unresolved.

A WORKED EXAMPLE, ASSEMBLED FROM THE ARTICLES

THE CONFLICT

A holiday both parents want with the child, each for sincere, emotionally compelling reasons.

DOUBLE BIND?

Yes. Both reasons are real, and the child cannot be in two places at once. The plan says this holiday is with the other parent, and I return to it.

MOVEMENT

Around bedtimes, a small request expands and pulls in history. Corrections there land as threat. Structure becomes the main tool in that area.

THE DRIFT

I have started choosing my timing carefully and carrying logistics that are not mine.

AN ISLAND

Predictable routines, emotional availability, and clear expectations at my house.

LEFT UNRESOLVED

The bedtime difference between houses, for now.

Part one: is this a double bind?

Compassion without structure leads to chaos. Structure without compassion leads to rigidity. The plan exists to hold both.

THE CONFLICT

What do we both want, and when?

How heated is it? (0) (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10)

TWO REALITIES

Both reasons

My reason, and the other parent's reason as I understand it. Both can be sincere at once.

MY REASON

THEIR REASON, AS I UNDERSTAND IT

THE TEST

Signs of a double bind

Check what applies.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Both reasons are real and emotionally compelling | ☐ There is one child and one stretch of time |
| ☐ We are arguing about whose pain is greater | ☐ The conversation keeps returning to fairness |
| ☐ The plan already covers this | ☐ Any decision will hurt someone |

THE PLAN

The decision rule

What the plan says, and how I return to it without claiming my pain counts more.

THE PLAN SAYS...

AND I RETURN TO IT. HOW I ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER PARENT'S PAIN WHILE I DO:

WHAT I WILL GRIEVE ABOUT THIS, AND WHO I WILL GRIEVE IT WITH:

IF THE PLAN ITSELF NEEDS TO CHANGE

Future changes go through deliberate legal or mediated processes, not renegotiation inside the present conflict.

WHAT I WOULD BRING TO THAT PROCESS, AND WHEN:

Deferring to the plan is not saying feelings do not matter. It acknowledges that both sets of reasons are valid, and that because of that, the structure both parents chose in advance is what prevents chronic warfare.

Part two: what movement is available, area by area

This describes what happens in the interaction, not who the other parent is. It can differ by area and change over time.

WHEN TENSION ENTERS

What I have seen

Across our exchanges, check what has happened.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Moments of repair after a hard exchange | ☐ Corrections land as a threat |
| ☐ Some questioning of a reaction, even later | ☐ Boundaries consistently bring escalation |
| ☐ A boundary that took shape over time | ☐ Effort circulates without producing change |

AREA

Schedules and handoffs

Which strategy fits here now?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Some movement: clarity, repetition, build structure gradually | ☐ Little movement: reduce engagement, structure does the organizing |
|--|--|

WHAT I WILL DO

AREA

Routines and bedtimes

Which strategy fits here now?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Some movement: clarity, repetition, build structure gradually | ☐ Little movement: reduce engagement, structure does the organizing |
|--|--|

WHAT I WILL DO

AREA

School and health

Which strategy fits here now?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Some movement: clarity, repetition, build structure gradually | ☐ Little movement: reduce engagement, structure does the organizing |
|--|--|

WHAT I WILL DO

AREA

Holidays and changes

Which strategy fits here now?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Some movement: clarity, repetition, build structure gradually | ☐ Little movement: reduce engagement, structure does the organizing |
|--|--|

WHAT I WILL DO

Part three: the drift

ADAPTATION

What I have started doing

The system trains us to absorb more to keep things stable. Check what applies.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ I soften my language | ☐ I delay requests |
| ☐ I choose my timing carefully | ☐ I carry more than I should |

WHAT I HAVE ABSORBED THAT BELONGS TO THE OTHER HOUSE, OR TO THE PLAN

Part four: islands of stability and my own capacity

Resilience here organizes around orientation rather than endurance.

ISLANDS OF STABILITY I CONTROL

A stable anchor in one home supports regulation across both.

PREDICTABLE ROUTINES:

EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY:

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS:

HOLDING CONFLICTING REALITIES

We want consistency for our children, and we recognize the limits of the other parent. We feel the pull to engage, and the cost of doing so. These can coexist without resolving into one position.

THE TRUTHS I AM HOLDING AT ONCE:

PROTECTING CAPACITY

Vigilance, logistics, and regulation accumulate. Capacity is a resource.

ENGAGEMENT THAT PRODUCES NO CHANGE, WHICH I WILL LIMIT:

WHAT I WILL LET STAY UNRESOLVED:

WHERE MY ENERGY HAS INFLUENCE:

MY REFERENCE POINT

What can change, what stays stable, when engagement helps, and when distance supports the system.

Self-trust comes from repeated experiences of staying organized within complexity, without requiring the whole system to align first.