



Back to School for 2020 – 2021 is creating areas of potential conflict for intact, separated, and divorced families. Parenting decisions around major issues, like education, can be stressful even in the best of conditions. For the intact family where one parent has historically taken the lead on the decision, in the world of Covid-19, both parents are weighing in on what to do about Patrick & Shannon's education, be it college, high school, middle school, grade school or pre school... and not always with consensus or family harmony.

Parenting during the pandemic has added stress, and complications have far reaching tentacles. With school start dates just around the corner, and some in question, families are faced with decisions about if their child will go to brick and mortar schools, go virtually or a hybrid combination or just take a “gap” year. School districts are conflicted about what to do and many speculate that even if they put a plan in place, it might not survive until Thanksgiving. Some schools have decided brick and mortar August 18 and some no brick and mortar until January, 2021. Families with children in all levels of schooling, college, high school, middle school, grade school and preschool (OK My Irish Catholic is Showing!) are dealing with inconsistent scheduling between the schools, the variations of the hybrid days and the hours of school operation. The options are enough to make any parent's head spin and many grandparents, who play a vital role especially today in care giving, are grateful that they are not dealing with the issues their children are facing for the grandchildren and gratitude aside, they still want to weigh in on the final decision of the education of their wee ones. All are potential hotbeds for conflict.

When, (not if) you and your partner disagree about how to handle school this fall, here are some points to consider in this process:

1. Though their points of view may be as much as 180 degrees apart from yours, most of the time parents want what is best for their children. They

know the hopes and dreams each of them had to get their children to their adult life successfully. A moment of “grace” to remember that, may leave room for the possibility that someone else may have an idea which is not “disastrous”.

2. *There are pros and cons for each position.* Proponents of the brick and mortar argue that the in-school learning environment is important for the healthy development and social well-being of kids. Proponents of virtual learning argue that safety, the children's, yours and that of extended family members, and the world at large, may make distance learning a safer and/or a more preferable option. Despite all the opinions, there are no right wrong, good bad answers or outcomes...yet.

3. *Frequently one parent is able to teach and the other supports learning but is not able to assist with the teaching, learning on whatever educational platform the children have.* Pre Covid-19, we often heard parents complain that homework does not get done or is not done properly when the other parent is in charge. Ideally, each parent manages schoolwork and childcare during their parenting time. But these issues of getting or not getting homework done, often overflow into requests to change or restrict parenting time a conflict that may be generated from any parenting dispute.



4. *Parents have legitimate concerns about children's safety in a school setting and wherever they go.* Despite the statistics that little children are not carriers and high school/college students are super carriers, it is a challenge to ensure the children will be safe, follow the rules or that the parents of their friends will. Masks and social distancing can be another area where parents may not agree. If in dispute, a neutral source may be the suggestions of local government and health officials. If your partner insists on children having or attending social gatherings or putting your child in situations that make their exposure to Covid-19 higher than your risk tolerance is, a reference back to number 1 above might be needed.

5. *If separated or divorced with a parenting agreement or court order, what do the terms of that agreement or parenting plan say about educational decisions for the child?* Most agreements generically say parents share educational decision making. Again, a neutral position could be to follow the recommendations of local government, school and health officials, The information on the street today is conflicting and ever-changing but if you can identify the information source you can agree to use, you may successfully apply it to your decision making process for your child's unique needs. No matter how well or poorly a parent handles school issues, if there is a Court Order in place, the terms of the court order control.

This has been an exciting time in our office! Lots of new issues, no clear direction and important issues with long term impact have presented themselves. It is been rejuvenating to be a part of this on what I thought was

going to be "the back 9" of my practice.

Mediation is a great platform to sort out the issues for a family. It is a place where a neutral facilitator can guide a challenging discussion and facilitate a resolution that is workable and perhaps unique for your family. The Mediator will help analyze your family situation and identify potential areas of both positive and negative impact in a specific situation...especially where there is fear, confusion or parties going deeper and deeper into a position. A Mediator can help create an agreement that will support your child's learning and keep you and your partner out of court.

Remember, today there is NO one ideal solutions for everyone. The schools know they cannot predict how they will be schooling, perhaps for another 2 months or 2 years, no matter what approach they take with back-to-school... your Mediator knows that too. The Mediator's attention will be on helping you identify the specific areas of disagreement and how those disagreements may be most effectively resolved to increase the benefit and reduce the risk to your child so that you can make an informed decision that supports your hopes and dreams for your children, to get them to their adult lives successfully, no matter what the world thinks you should do!

"10 percent of conflicts are due to differences of opinion...90 percent are due to wrong tone of voice" - Unknown

"Conflict cannot survive without your Participation" - Wayne Dyer

The Law Office of Brigid A. Duffield, P.C. wishes you a spectacular and conflict-free back to school season!

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