



Young Children in Divorce and Separation: The YCIDS Program

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE GROUP AND MEDIATION DISCUSSIONS

The following questions are designed for practitioners to use as discussion prompts, either in running YCIDS groups, or in the course of mediation or other dispute resolution processes.

Module 1. What's so big about the little years?

A. *The early foundations of emotional life*

Group discussion questions:

1. What are some of the key developmental factors that parents of very young children need to focus on? What specifically did we learn about babies brains when they are born?

Discussion example answers:

Early decisions influence lifetime development. Early brain growth development needs consistent patterns. The brain is 25% formed at birth. By age 3, the mass is 80% of the adult brain.

2. What are some examples of 'patterns' in parenting that babies might need to help their healthy early brain development?

Discussion example answers:

Lots of smiling, laughing, playing, singing. Also seeing positive relationships between others, parents being responsive.

Personal Reflective questions:

1. Can you think of a time when your baby might not have experienced the patterns and consistency discussed? What (if anything), did you notice happening at this time with your child?

2. What are some things you can personally commit to, in order to work on keeping your child's stress levels low?

B. *Baby stress and the role of parents*

Group discussion questions:

1. This module talks about parents as the 'architects of babies brains' - what do we understand this to mean?

Discussion example answers:

Consistent nurturing becomes encoded in babies brains. Sets up important foundations for learning and exploration, future language and learning.



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QUESTIONS TO GUIDE GROUP AND MEDIATION DISCUSSIONS

2. What parent behaviors might contribute to stress in babies?

Discussion example answers:

Inconsistent, insensitive and harsh parenting that goes on for weeks and months. Wires the babies expectations that the parent might not be there for them or to support them.

3. The attachment system is a way that children can signal their distress. How does a child typically signal their distress to adults?

Discussion example answers:

They might cry, approach for comfort, cling, or if less secure, may become very quiet, withdrawn, or angry.

Personal reflective questions:

1. This module talks about parents as 'guards'. Can you think of a time when you responded to conflict in a way that would have protected or guarded your child from feeling stressed?

2. Can you think of a time you were aware your baby was feeling stressed by what was happening between his/her parents? How did you respond to this?

3. Who are the key caregivers in your child's life, to whom your child naturally turns for soothing and comfort?



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Module 2.

Being good enough parents who live apart

A. *Good enough parenting*

Group discussion questions:

1. Describe what you think the phrase 'good enough parenting' means?

Discussion example answers:

Keeping the child safe from danger, parents being sensitive, responsive and predictable, taking time to play and delight in the child, slowing down.

2. In this module, what are some of the things we learned that are harmful to a child's development?

Discussion example answers:

Angry, distressed parents, a lot of conflict, preoccupied parents, violence, too much change or uncertainty for the child.

Personal reflective question:

Write down some ideas you have for working on your own 'good enough co-parenting'? (with your child's other parent).

B. *Noticing feelings*

Group discussion questions:

1. We learnt in this module that all behavior has meaning and purpose. What might some of the emotions be that our children are trying to convey when they are distressed?

Discussion example answers:

They might be overwhelmed, scared, worried, tired, fearful of separation, unable to predict what is about to happen, unsettled and out of routine, hungry and tired, and a combination of these.

Personal Reflective questions:

1. What does the phrase 'staying bigger, stronger, wiser and kinder' mean to you?

2. Do you have any experiences from your own history that make parenting challenging for you now? If so, what might be some of the triggers that alert you to that challenge?

C. *Attachment*

Group discussion questions:

1. What is attachment?

Discussion example answers:

A child's secure base for growing and thriving. A secure base for the child to explore from.



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A unique bond with someone who is usually a parent, with whom the baby has lived. A

baby needs to form at least 1 to survive and thrive.

2. When looking at care plans for a child, can you think of some examples that might be confusing or stressful for a young child?

Discussion example answers:

When the child doesn't know where they are, who is looking after them, how long until they can see the other parent. A lot of moving around, different day care arrangements, and multiple care-givers.

3. What might influence the sensitivity with which we parent our children?

Discussion example answers:

Mental health, support of family and friends, own attachment history, current levels of stress

4. Discuss what you understand the idea of 'gender biases' to mean after watching this module. Do children really prefer one gender over another?

Discussion example answers:

Current research shows babies do not have a gender bias but a simple bias towards familiar, predictable and responsive caregiving.

Personal Reflective questions:

1. Who are the key people in your child's life, who they are likely to have formed an attachment with?

2. This module discusses the idea that 'time matters but what you do with your time is most important'. Can you reflect on a time where you both experienced something simple yet special while being together?



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Module 3. Young children and parenting plans

A. Parenting plan principles

Group discussion questions:

1. What are some examples of what we need to avoid to minimize stress for children when making parenting plans?

Discussion example answers:

Overnights when trust and security are not established, too much travel, conflict at handovers, too much disruption of sleep and normal routine, etc.

Personal Reflective questions:

1. What is the current type and amount of care time your child has with both parents? Do you feel this is the best arrangement to support your child developmentally, at this time?

2. After learning more about children's development and brain functioning, can you reflect on any part of your current care arrangements which you might look at differently in the future?

3. What did you find useful from the 'Watch, Wait and Wonder' discussion? Do you think you can commit to this short exercise in the near future with your child?

B. Overnight parenting plans:

0-2 years

Group discussion questions:

1. What are the factors that can help overnights work with young children?

Discussion example answers:

Matching the arrangement to what the child is accustomed to, not disrupting the child's routine, ensuring the child feels trust and security with both parents. The child is safe with and soothed by both parents. Periods away from the main parent are matched to the comfort and needs of very young babies.

2. What are the key behavioral signs that a baby is too stressed?

Discussion example answers:

Child is often irritable and fretful, trouble sleeping, troubling playing alone, clingy and resisting, feeding and eating problems, these behaviors lasting more than 2 weeks. Will often show these signs when back with main caregiver- this is attachment in action, they are signaling that their distress needs to be lowered.

C. 2-3 year olds



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Group discussion questions:

1. What are the important factors to consider in planning overnights for 2-3 year olds?

Discussion example answers:

Make sure to start at the right level for the child, which will vary according to the child's comfort and security historically with each parent. Grow the overnight time and review along the way, try to keep the number of weekly caregivers under 4.

D. 4-5 year olds

Group discussion questions:

We know most children this age can manage a regular and consistent schedule. What matters the most for children this age?

Discussion example answers:

If both parents are a source of comfort, regular shared overnights can work well, dependent on how well parents get on and how warm and supportive they are with their child. Watch out for noticeable negative changes in behavior over a 3+ week period that follow a change to the parenting plan.

Personal reflective questions:

In looking ahead and considering your child's age, what points from this module will you take into consideration for future parenting plans?

In addition, is there anything you are you doing currently that may need to be reviewed or revised?

E. Moving between parents

Group discussion questions:

1. What are some key things parents can do to optimize their child's experience of moving between parents

Discussion example answers:

Say hello, share information about the child that is important, re. eating, sleeping etc. Save difficult conversations for another time. Give the child reassurance if they are upset. Take things at the child's pace.

NB- If this is not possible, use another familiar person and a neutral venue.

F. How will you know if your parenting plan is working?

Group discussion questions:

1. In the 'basic stress test' discussed in this module, what do parents need to ensure?

Discussion example answers:

The child is physically safe, emotionally safe, daily stress is as low as it can be, child is seeking comfort from both parents, enjoys time with both parents, their behavior is settled in both homes.

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Module 4. Children need a village

A. Deepening the ties that matter, now and always

Group discussion questions:

1. Who are some of the people your child's 'village' might include?

Discussion example answers:

Grandparents, extended family, new partners and friends.

2. What can children gain from these people?

Discussion example answers:

'Social capitol': History, cultural and religious familiarity, love

Personal reflective question:

Reflect on your child's 'village'. Who are the key people in their life and in what important ways do they influence your child's life?

B. Gate keeping

Group discussion questions:

What does 'gate-keeping' refer to in this module and how might it relate to your child's village?

Discussion example answers:

One parent inappropriately taking control of the decision making about the child.

Different from normal level of concern about the child's comfort and safety. Healthy villages have low walls, gates that let loving caregivers in and out as the child needs, no 'angry gatekeepers'.



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Module 5. Parenting bridges: Sorting out the conflict

A. Facts about conflict

Group discussion questions:

1. Discuss the difference as you understood it between conflict and acrimony?

Discussion example answers:

Acrimony refers to psychological feelings, conflict refers to the way parents behave with each other. A small amount of conflict is normal, but frequent, intense and unresolved conflict is a problem. Both can be very toxic for a child.

2. Why is conflict between parents especially difficult for younger children?

Discussion example answers:

They can't do anything to stop it, they are especially troubled by conflict between their 'heroes', they soak it up into their developing brains.

3. If violence has occurred between parents, what are some of the things that need to be considered in order to help the child recover?

Discussion example answers:

The guidance of a professional might be needed. The child will need reassurance to feel safe again. Prevention is best - gaining control over strong emotions is very important. In some cases (not many), the only safe option will be for the child to be removed from contact with the parent - cooperation between parents is not the goal here.

B. Sorting out the conflict

Group discussion questions:

1. If you are planning to co-parent, what are some key things to remember when negotiating?

Discussion example answers:

Cooperation and communication need to be a priority. Professional support may be required.

2. What are some of the characteristics of parents who are able to manage their conflict?

Discussion example answers:

They are safe with each other, they work through their emotions, find a safe outlet for tough feelings, look for solutions, get good support when they need it, stay business like with their ex, respect each other's importance to their child, prioritize the child's needs, reassure and support the child at handover times, keep a secure bridge between them for their child to cross.

Personal reflective questions:

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In this module, the importance of the child's world needing to feel like one, not two is

discussed. What did this mean to you and is there anything practical in your child's life you could work on to help it to feel more like one world?

C. Parenting bridges

Group discussion questions:

1. What did the analogy of the bridge illustrate in terms of the support children need from their parents?

Discussion example questions:

Children need to feel shared, not divided. They need to feel supported, not 'wobbly' or 'unsupported' due to parental conflict.

Personal reflective question:

What do you think it is like to be your young child on their current 'bridge?' List some ways their bridge could be strengthened.