

Conflict Surfaces

*A Systems Framework for Reducing Recurring
Co-Parenting Conflict — Free Sample*

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IMPORTANT DISCLAIMERS

This book is not legal advice. The author is not a lawyer, and nothing in this book creates a lawyer–client relationship. Family law varies by jurisdiction and changes over time; the legal references in this book describe Canadian federal law and public guidance as of the time of writing. Before signing, filing, or relying on any parenting arrangement, consult a qualified family-law professional in your jurisdiction.

A note on jurisdiction. The author writes from Canada, and the legal citations in this book are Canadian because those are the sources he can verify. The framework itself does not depend on them. The institutions this book leans on — written parenting plans, best-interests standards, mediation, parenting coordination, court orders as a last resort — exist in recognizably similar form across the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and most other jurisdictions, under locally varying names and rules. Wherever you live, treat the design method as portable and the legal specifics as a prompt to check your own jurisdiction’s version.

This book is not therapy or clinical advice. The author is not a mental-health professional. If you or your children are struggling, a qualified counsellor or therapist can provide help this book cannot.

If you are not safe, this book is not your starting point. The design methods in this book assume two parents who, however much they conflict, are not a danger to each other or to their children. Family violence, coercive control, stalking, intimidation, threats, and child-abduction risk are not ordinary co-parenting conflict, and they are not design problems. If any of these are present in your situation, contact

local support services, get legal advice, and build a safety plan with professionals before applying anything in these pages. In Canada, you can find family violence resources through the Department of Justice and provincial services; in an emergency, call 911.

The families in this book are composites. Maya, Daniel, Priya, Marc, Nadia, Tom, and Aaron are illustrative composites constructed for teaching purposes. They are not real people, and any resemblance to actual persons or families is coincidental.

INTRODUCTION

Why this book exists

It was a hockey bag.

At least, that is what everyone agreed they were arguing about.

The bag wasn't packed. One skate was missing. Pickup was already twenty minutes late, and two adults who had spent thousands of dollars on lawyers stood in a driveway arguing about equipment worth less than a tank of gas, while an eleven-year-old waited in the car and studied the zipper of his coat.

Of course it wasn't about the hockey bag.

It was about the last four Fridays, and the email from March, and who apologized last, and who never does. The bag was just the place where all of it happened to be standing. You will meet these two adults properly in Chapter 1 — their names are Maya and Daniel.

But first, the question this book is built on: why does that argument keep happening in that driveway? Not why do these two people disagree — they are separated; disagreement is the baseline. Why does that same collision keep landing in the driveway, on the same day, in the same shape?

Because the driveway is not where their conflict lives. The driveway is where their conflict is *scheduled*.

Every year, families separate. They hire lawyers. They go to mediation. They read articles. They buy parenting books. They promise themselves they will put the children first. And then, months or years later, many of them are still having the same argument. Pickup. Drop-off. Vacations. Money. School emails. A jacket that didn't come back. A message that should have taken twenty seconds and ruined a whole evening instead.

This is not for lack of good resources. Canadian family law already points the right way — best interests of the child, protection from conflict, dispute resolution before court, parenting plans in writing.¹

So why do so many parents still feel trapped on a loop?

Because most advice still assumes, at some level, that the next conversation is going to save you.

Sometimes it does. Sometimes a calm conversation works. Sometimes mediation works. Sometimes both parents are tired, sad, decent, and still capable of compromise.

But sometimes the problem is no longer the topic of the argument. Sometimes the problem is the way the collision keeps getting scheduled.

Underneath that observation sits a distinction this whole book rests on: some of your conflict is **necessary** — property, support, parenting time — and has an end. Most of what wears separated families down is **manufactured** — generated fresh every week by badly designed interact-

ions. Chapter 4 makes the distinction precise. For now, one sentence of it is enough: you cannot design away the necessary conflict, but you can stop manufacturing the rest.

That is what this book is for.

This is not a book about diagnosing your ex. It is not a book about proving you were right. It is not a revenge book, and it is not a courtroom fantasy. It does not assume one parent is a villain and the other is a saint.

It is a book about repeat conflict. It is a book for the parent who says:

We have explained this issue ten times. We have traded the same emails over and over. We have used up all the goodwill. What I need now is not another argument. What I need is a better rule.

That is the heart of the book.

Where this lens comes from

I should tell you who I am, because it explains why this book looks the way it does.

I am not a family lawyer. I am not a therapist. I am a systems designer. I have spent my career in software, and the software I build serves the rail industry — my company, Standard Rail, makes systems that help move things reliably between parties who do not particularly trust each other.

That last phrase is the important one.

Every day, railcars full of valuable cargo are handed off between companies that are, in every other context, competitors. Nobody involved relies on goodwill. The handoff works because of interchange rules: who inspects, who signs, what happens when a car arrives late, what happens when it arrives damaged, who pays, and by when. When a handoff fails, nobody convenes a meeting about whether the other company is a bad person. Someone asks: *which rule was missing?*

Systems design taught me a discipline that turns out to matter enormously in family conflict: **when the same failure keeps happening at the same point in a system, the problem is almost never the people currently standing at that point.** It is the design of the point itself. You can replace the people and the failure will repeat. Or you can redesign the interaction and watch the failure quietly stop.

Then I started paying attention to what separation does to the people living through it — the Friday texts, the parking-lot handoffs, the same loop landing on schedule every week — and I saw something I recognized immediately. A Friday handoff of a child between two exhausted adults is, structurally, an interchange. It has a location, a time window, cargo that must not be damaged, two parties with low trust, and no written rule for what happens when someone is twenty minutes late. Families run dozens of these interchanges every month with less process than two railroads use to hand off a boxcar of paper.

We routinely engineer that reliability for paper. A Friday handoff of something irreplaceable deserves at least the same design attention.

And when I started reading the advice this world runs on, I noticed something that bothered me more than any single bad handoff: **nearly all of it is reactive.** The communication tips respond to the last fight. The email responds to the last email. The lawyer responds to the angry client. The motion responds to the motion before it. Everyone in the system is responding, and almost no one is designing. In every system I have ever worked on, a component that only reacts is a component that fails on a schedule.

The claim this book stands on: most resources help people *respond* to conflict. Far fewer reduce the number of times conflict gets a chance to occur. That gap — not any communication deficit — is why the same collision keeps getting scheduled, and it is the gap this book exists to fill.

Because I am not a lawyer or a clinician, this book is careful about its lane. For the law, it leans on Justice Canada and the Divorce Act. For safety and screening, it defers to AFCC's professional standards and says plainly, in every relevant chapter, that family violence and coercive control are not design problems and need different help. What I bring is the piece those resources mostly do not: a working method for finding the recurring failure point and redesigning it.

If trust exists, families can often live on flexibility. If trust is badly damaged, flexibility becomes fuel. A soft plan

becomes a hard life.

That is why written parenting plans matter — writing things down keeps a record, prevents future conflict, and gives schools and doctors something to work from.²

This book takes that idea one step further. It says: do not just write a plan. **Write a system.**

A system for exchanges. A system for communication. A system for change requests. A system for serious decisions. A system for what happens when you cannot agree.

Not because families should become robotic. Not because children need coldness. But because children need relief.

And because the first rule of every reliable system applies at home too: **do not design for the people you wish you had. Design for the people you actually have.**

Protecting children from conflict is one of the most important things separated parents can do — long-running conflict causes children real, measurable harm. The developmental research has said so for decades,³ and the law now says so explicitly.⁴

This book exists because many people do not need more blame. They need fewer repeated collisions.

It exists because “just communicate better” is often too vague to save a Thursday-night handoff.

It exists because there are families who cannot build perfect agreement, but can still build enough structure to protect their children.

And it exists because peace, in many separated families, is not built by changing the other parent.

It is built by redesigning the interaction.

How to use this book

This is a short book, and it is meant to be used, not just read. A few things worth knowing before you start.

Read Part I in order. The book builds a vocabulary — necessary versus manufactured conflict, conflict surfaces, keystone conflicts, conflict load — and each chapter assumes the one before it. Part I gives you the diagnosis. Parts II and III give you the tools. Part IV shows you the road — what the first year actually looks like — and the destination.

You will meet three families. Maya and Daniel, Priya and Marc, Nadia and Tom. They are composites, not real people, but everything that happens to them happens somewhere every week. They carry the book's ideas through real situations — including one family whose first attempt fails, because yours might too. That is part of the method.

Do the exercises. Each chapter ends with one. They are short, they build on each other, and by the end of Part I they will have produced something concrete: a map of where your conflict actually lives and a number — your conflict load — that you can watch fall as you redesign. The appendices at the back turn the exercises into working documents: exchange protocols, a playbook

template, email templates, a review agenda, and a troubleshooting guide for the days the system is stressed.

One number to track. If you take a single practice from this book, take this one: count your live conflict surfaces today, write the number down, and recount at every review. The goal of everything in these pages is to make that number smaller.

If your divorce is still in litigation, start anyway. You cannot eliminate the necessary conflict — property, support, parenting time — while it is being decided. But the day-to-day friction around exchanges, school, and scheduling is manufactured conflict, and you can start dismantling it now, without waiting to settle. Chapter 4 draws the necessary-vs-manufactured distinction precisely.

If you are not safe, stop here. This book assumes conflict, not danger. If your situation involves violence, coercive control, or fear, the right first step is professional support and a safety plan — see the disclaimer at the front of this book. These pages will still be here afterward.

One last thing. This book will not ask you to think better of your co-parent. It will not ask you to heal, forgive, or reconcile on any schedule. It asks something smaller and more achievable: change the design of the interactions that keep going wrong. The rest of your life is yours.

PART I

Foundations

CHAPTER 1

The Day I Realized This Wasn't About Divorce

The turning point is often smaller than people expect.

Not a trial. Not a dramatic hearing. Not a devastating email.

Often it is ordinary: a pickup that runs late, a backpack missing at the end of a weekend, a message about a schedule change, a disagreement about whether a child should call at 8:00 or 8:30.

You tell yourself this one is minor. You will sort it out. Then the next week, the same structure produces a different version of the same fight. A late reply becomes disrespect. A routine exchange becomes a confrontation. A request becomes an accusation. The child stands there with a lunch kit while two adults wrestle with unspoken history.

That is the moment many parents start noticing something important:

The content changes, but the pattern stays the same.

Canada's official parenting guide makes a quiet admission: some separated parents can meet face-to-face, it says,

while others should communicate only in writing, only when necessary — and if the relationship is strained, meetings should be formal, scheduled, and in a neutral location.⁴

Buried in that mild advice is something bigger than it looks: the beginning of design thinking in family life.

Some families should not keep relying on the most emotionally loaded version of contact. They need formality. They need timing. They need neutral ground. They need less improvisation.

In other words, they need process.

A lot of separated parents begin with the hope that everything can stay informal. They think flexibility is a sign of maturity. In healthy relationships, it often is. But in strained relationships, “let’s just figure it out” can become the phrase that guarantees the next fight.

A composite example:

Parent A sends: “Can you switch tonight’s pickup to 6:30?” Parent B reads: “You don’t value my time.” Parent B replies too quickly. Parent A reacts to the tone instead of the problem.

Now the real subject is no longer the pickup. It is respect, control, memory, fairness, and every wound that came before.

The child still needs to get in the car.

This chapter’s main claim is simple:

When the same conflict keeps returning, stop assuming you have a topic problem. You may have a structure problem.

That does not mean feelings are irrelevant. Feelings matter. Grief matters. Fear matters. Old injuries matter. But if every future exchange depends on two hurt people improvising calmly in real time, you have built a system that asks too much.

The goal is not to erase emotion. The goal is to stop requiring emotional excellence at every recurring handoff.

That is why the rest of this book moves away from one big question — *How do I finally make the other parent understand me?* — and toward a different one:

How do I make sure this exact fight does not need to happen again next week?

That is when the work changes. You stop trying to win individual arguments and start identifying repeated interactions. You stop treating every dispute like a fresh moral crisis and start noticing the machinery.

And once you see the machinery, you can begin to redesign it.

Three families you will meet again

Throughout this book you will follow three families. All are composites — built from many real situations, with no real names and no real identifying details — but every-

hing that happens to them happens, somewhere, every week.

Maya and Daniel have two children, eight and eleven. Maya works in software and rewrites every text to Daniel at least twice, tea going cold beside her. Daniel is a nurse whose shifts change monthly and who has never once, in the history of the arrangement, remembered a phone charger. Their separation was not dramatic, but their Friday handoff is. Someone is always a little late. The eleven-year-old's gear is always partly in the wrong house. What starts as a text about a jacket ends, most weeks, as a text about respect. They would both tell you the other one "makes everything difficult." They are both partly right, and it is not helping.

Priya and Marc have one child, thirteen, who plays competitive soccer. Their fights are almost never at the door — they are in writing. Marc sends his emails at 11:30 at night, when the day's frustrations have fully fermented; Priya deletes two drafts before sending anything, and still regrets a third of what survives. Registration fees, tournament travel, who approved what, a reimbursement request that sat unanswered for three weeks and then detonated. Each email starts about money and ends about history. Both of them dread the notification sound on their phones.

Nadia and Tom have a four-year-old daughter. Tom is a paramedic whose shifts rotate; he forgets birthdays, including his own, and has never missed a swim lesson. Nadia's schedule is fixed, and so is everything else about

her — she is the kind of person who labels her pantry shelves. On paper, their arrangement is the simplest of the three. In practice it changes every week, because Tom's shift schedule changes every week. They matter to this book for a particular reason: the first rule they write will fail. Watching them figure out *why* it failed — and fix the rule instead of blaming each other for it — may be the most useful thing in these pages.

None of these families has a villain. All of them have a loop. As the book builds its method, you will watch each of them find their loop, name it, and redesign it — not perfectly, and not warmly, but enough.

CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

Recurring family conflict is often not just about disagreement. It is about repeated exposure to the same poorly structured interaction.

READER EXERCISE

Write down the last three arguments that felt bigger than their subject — the ones where a pickup time or a backpack somehow turned into something else. Now ask:

- What was the actual event?
- Where did it happen?
- What decision had to be made in real time?
- What rule, if any, already existed?

If the same type of event appears more than once, you have found a repeat interaction. That is the place to start.

Found one? Good. Before any designing can begin, there is a habit to clear away — because the first thing most of us do with a repeat interaction is blame a person for it.

Want to keep reading?

You have just read the opening of *Conflict Surfaces*.

Chapter 1 made one claim: when the same fight keeps returning, you do not have a topic problem. You have a structure problem.

The rest of the book turns that claim into a method.

Part I — Foundations finishes the diagnosis: why a difficult co-parent is a design condition rather than a character verdict, why trust is a dependency you can engineer out, and how to map the specific surfaces where your conflict actually happens — and count them.

Part II — Conflict Engineering does the design work: finding the keystone conflict whose removal quiets the others, replacing recurring negotiations with standing rules, assembling the rules into a parenting playbook, and getting fights out of your inbox.

Part III — Communication and Process covers the harder terrain: the four levels of communication, an escalation ladder for when agreement is not available, building systems a skeptical co-parent would accept, and what to do when process is the only thing you control.

Part IV — Designing Peace maps the first year of a redesigned system — the early wins, the plateau, the rule

that fails — and describes the destination: conflict made boring, the most heavily engineered thing in the room.

Nine appendices turn the method into working documents: exchange protocols, a playbook template, email templates, a keystone worksheet, a review agenda, and a troubleshooting guide for the days the system is stressed.

You will also follow Maya and Daniel, Priya and Marc, and Nadia and Tom the whole way — including the rule that fails, and what fixing it looks like.

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Conflict Surfaces: A Systems Framework for Reducing Recurring Co-Parenting Conflict is available in paperback and ebook.

For articles, worksheets, and updates to the framework, visit **conflictsurfaces.com**.

Notes

Sources for the numbered references throughout the book. Legal references describe Canadian federal law and public guidance as of the time of writing; see “A note on jurisdiction” in the front matter.

1. Federal Divorce Act, especially sections 7.2, 7.3, 16, and 16.6.
Core legal frame for best interests, child protection from conflict, dispute resolution, and parenting plans. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/D-3.4/section-7.3.html> ↩
2. Department of Justice Canada, *Making plans: A guide to parenting arrangements after separation or divorce* (full guide, PDF). A core source for child-focused planning, communication, review and modification, and practical parenting-plan structure. <https://canada.justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/mp-fdp.pdf> ↩
3. Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. T., *Marital Conflict and Children: An Emotional Security Perspective* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010). ISBN 978-1-60623-519-5. Core research synthesis on how exposure to interparental conflict affects children’s adjustment. ↩
4. Department of Justice Canada, *Making plans*, Part 4: communication, decision-making, and conflict. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p4.html> ↩