

SUOAD TRACK

PARALLEL REALITIES: Co-Parenting in the Context of SUOAD

Understanding the Patterns. Changing the System.



2026 SYSTEMIC FAMILY THERAPY CONFERENCE

Sponsored by AAMFT



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*Strategic Approaches
for Families Facing
Complex Challenges*

MEET YOUR PRESENTER

Parallel Realities: Co-Parenting in the Context of SUOAD



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Dr. Northey is a licensed marriage and family therapist, clinical supervisor, and consultant with over 30 years of experience working with individuals, couples, and families facing complex challenges. He specializes in high-conflict co-parenting, systemic approaches to addiction and compulsive behaviors, and family systems impacted by secrecy, betrayal, and loss of trust.

Dr. Northey is an AAMFT Approved Supervisor and provides clinical supervision, consultation, and program development to therapists and organizations. His work integrates systemic family therapy, motivational interviewing, and behaviorally anchored strategies to create meaningful change in families and systems.



30+ YEARS

Clinical, supervisory,
and consulting
experience



SYSTEMIC FOCUS

Working with families
in high-conflict and
court-involved contexts



TRAINER & EDUCATOR

National presenter and
curriculum developer



CHANGE THE PATTERN

Turning insight into
awareness, strategy,
and change



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WHOSE REALITY IS REAL?

Two parents. Two stories. One high-conflict system.

*Different
Perspectives.
Brighter
Paths.*

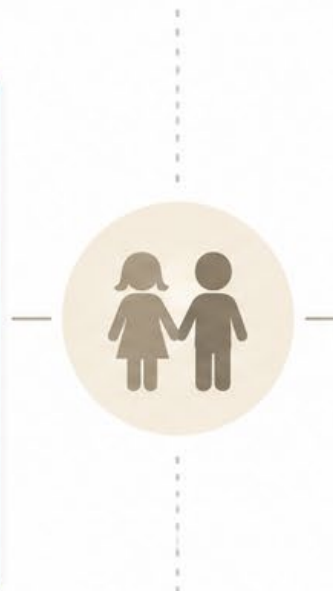
PARENT A

“



I've been sober for eight months. Every time I'm five minutes late, she tells everyone I've relapsed. She monitors everything I do and uses the kids to control me.

”



PARENT B

“

He lied to me for years about drinking. Then I found the gambling account. I'm not controlling him. I'm trying to keep our children safe.”

”



WHO'S RIGHT?



WHAT IF THAT'S THE WRONG QUESTION?

Let's look beyond the stories to the system.



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RETURN TO THE PARALLEL REALITIES

Same Parents. A Different Lens.

Parent A

*"I've changed.
Why won't she let go
of the past?"*

Parent B

*"He lied for years.
How am I supposed
to trust him?"*

~~WHO'S RIGHT?~~

WHAT WOULD YOU DO NOW?

*The goal isn't to resolve the competing realities.
It's to identify what the system needs next.*



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CONTENT VERSUS PROCESS

Same questions. Different outcomes.

CONTENT



- “Did you gamble?”
- “Were you drinking?”
- “Why was \$800 missing?”
- “Why didn’t you answer?”

Important questions.
But content alone rarely changes
the pattern.

PROCESS



SECRECY



SUSPICION



MONITORING



DEFENSIVENESS



ESCALATION



MORE SECRECY



Even when the content changes,
the process often stays the same—until we interrupt it.



SECRECY



Secrecy involves hiding information in a way that undermines trust.



Privacy involves personal boundaries that do not undermine trust.

EXAMPLES IN THIS CONTEXT:



Finances

Hiding spending, debt, or accounts.



Pornography

Concealing use that violates agreed-upon boundaries.



Post-divorce relationships

Keeping relationships secret that impact co-parenting.



2

OF 4

SUOAD TRACK

TRUST RUPTURE



When secrecy is discovered, trust is broken. Both parents experience increased fear, doubt, and uncertainty.

The rupture isn't just about what was hidden. It's about the perceived betrayal of agreements, values, and safety.



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ATTEMPTED “CONTROL”

After a trust rupture, parents may try to regain safety by controlling or monitoring.

IT EXISTS ON A SPECTRUM



REASONABLE SAFEGUARD

Proportionate, time-limited, and focused on safety or stability.



ANXIETY-DRIVEN MONITORING

Often well-intentioned, but driven by fear or uncertainty. May be excessive or increase over time.



COERCIVE CONTROL

Used to dominate, punish, or limit the other parent. Disproportionate and intrusive.

EXAMPLES: TRUST RUPTURE → ATTEMPTED “CONTROL”

- “Send me a picture showing where you are.”
- “I need access to the bank account.”
- “Take a breathalyzer before you get the children.”
- “Tell me who you’re dating.”

“

Context + Pattern + Function + Proportionality + Impact

*A systemic lens should help us understand patterns.
It should **never** be used to create false equivalence in the presence of coercion or abuse.*



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ESCALATION



Attempts at control often trigger defensiveness, withdrawal, or retaliation—creating a cycle that escalates over time and deepens the disconnection.



Control is largely an illusion. What we often observe are attempts to *reduce uncertainty, regain safety, or influence another person's behavior.*

And that's our transition to perhaps the most clinically important part of the workshop.



SAFETY CONCERN OR TRUST RUPTURE?

Both matter. They are different. And they require different responses.

TRUST RUPTURE



- Breach of agreements, expectations, or values
- Often involves secrecy, dishonesty, or omission
- Leads to loss of trust, increased anxiety, and attempted control
- Does not automatically mean the children are unsafe



SAFETY CONCERN



- Involves potential or actual risk of harm to a child
- May include substance use, violence, abuse, neglect, or unsafe environments
- Requires assessment, protection, and sometimes court or CPS involvement
- Can exist even when there is no trust rupture

“

*The fact that I don't trust you doesn't necessarily mean the children are unsafe with you.
And the fact that something is described as a trust problem doesn't mean there isn't genuine risk.*



CASE CHALLENGE

Trust problem, safety problem, or both?

Dad has been sober for nine months, consistently tests negative for alcohol, and hasn't missed parenting time.

Mom requires a breathalyzer result before every exchange and asks their 13-year-old whether Dad "seemed off."



Your turn:

Safety problem, trust problem,
or both?



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CASE CHALLENGE

Trust problem, safety problem, or both?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION



Mom recently discovered \$18,000 in previously undisclosed online gambling debt.



Your turn:
Does that change your formulation?
Why or why not?



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MOVE FROM LABELS TO IMPACT

Instead of asking “What is this parent?” ask “What is this behavior doing?”

COMMON LABELS

Addict

Controlling

Dishonest

Immature

High-conflict

Co-dependent



ASSESS BEHAVIORAL IMPACT (ACROSS KEY DOMAINS)



Child safety

Is the child at risk of harm?



Parenting functioning

Can the parent effectively meet the child's needs?



Reliability and predictability

Are agreements followed?



Financial stability

Is there financial chaos or risk?



Child involvement in the conflict

Is the child being pulled into adult issues?

“

*It's not about
who is right.
It's about what
the behavior
is doing.”*



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THE BEHAVIORAL IMPACT MATRIX

A practical way to assess impact in high-conflict cases.

DOMAIN	KEY CLINICAL QUESTION
 Child Safety	Is there demonstrable risk of harm to the child?
 Parenting Functioning	Can the parent adequately meet the child's needs?
 Reliability & Predictability	Are commitments and parenting responsibilities consistently met?
 Financial Stability	Is the behavior compromising resources or stability for the child?
 Child Involvement in the Conflict	Is the child being recruited to monitor, report, carry messages, or regulate the parents?



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APPLYING THE MATRIX

What do we know? What is the impact?

DOMAIN	CASE INFORMATION	IMPACT / CONSIDERATIONS
 Child Safety	Dad has been sober for nine months, consistently tests negative for alcohol, and hasn't missed parenting time.	No current evidence of immediate physical risk. Continue to monitor.
 Parenting Functioning	Consistently tests negative; attends parenting time; no missed visits.	Appears to be meeting the child's needs.
 Reliability & Predictability	Nine months sober; consistent testing; no missed parenting time.	Currently reliable and predictable.
 Financial Stability	Mom recently discovered \$18,000 in previously undisclosed online gambling debt.	Significant concern. May indicate ongoing secrecy and potential financial risk for the family.
 Child Involvement in the Conflict	Mom asks their 13-year-old whether Dad "seemed off" before every exchange.	Child is being recruited into adult monitoring and conflict. This is harmful, regardless of intent.

“

“The new gambling information changes our formulation—but it doesn't automatically prove that Dad is unsafe during parenting time. It tells us we need to assess a different domain of risk.”



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NOT ALL ATTEMPTS AT “CONTROL” ARE THE SAME

Context matters. Look at the pattern, function, and impact.



REASONABLE SAFEGUARD

Proportionate, time-limited, and focused on safety or stability.



ANXIETY-DRIVEN MONITORING

Often well-intentioned, but driven by fear or uncertainty. May be excessive or increase over time.



COERCIVE CONTROL

Used to dominate, punish, or limit the other parent. Disproportionate and intrusive.

Examples:

- Breathalyzer use per court order or mutual agreement
- Requiring documentation after a recent relapse
- Agreed-upon financial transparency during a defined recovery period

Examples:

- Frequent requests for testing “just to be sure”
- Repeatedly asking the child to report on the other parent
- Checking devices or accounts without clear agreement
- Difficulty letting go despite consistent evidence of stability

Examples:

- Demanding access to all financial accounts and devices
- Using monitoring as a condition for parenting time
- Threatening to withhold the children if demands are not met
- Using the child to spy, report, or regulate the other parent

“

Context + Pattern + Function + Proportionality + Impact

A systemic lens should help us understand patterns.

*It should **never** be used to create false equivalence in the presence of coercion or abuse.*



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SECRECY

From Hidden Information to Transparency

THE PROBLEM



Secrecy

Withholding, minimizing, or hiding information creates uncertainty and erodes trust.

COMMON EXAMPLES

- Undisclosed substance use or relapse
- Hidden financial activity (e.g., gambling, debt)
- Not sharing treatment progress or setbacks
- Omitting important changes in living situation, relationships, or travel
- Incomplete or inaccurate information about the child's schedule or needs



THE INTERVENTION



Transparency

Create reliable, appropriately bounded information systems.

PRACTICE STRATEGIES

- Use consistent, agreed-upon channels (e.g., OurFamilyWizard or email)
- Share relevant information proactively
- Be specific about what information will be shared, how, and how often
- Set reasonable boundaries to protect privacy while meeting the child's needs
- Follow through consistently

“

*“It's not about being completely transparent.
It's about being reliably transparent within appropriate boundaries.”*



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TRUST RUPTURE

From Broken Trust to Predictability

THE PROBLEM



Trust Rupture

Past deception, broken promises, or inconsistent behavior erodes trust and creates ongoing doubt.

COMMON EXAMPLES

- Lying about substance use, gambling, or finances
- Repeated broken commitments
- Minimizing or denying past behaviors
- Inconsistent follow-through with agreements
- Promises without action
- History of secrecy leading to ongoing suspicion



THE INTERVENTION



Predictability

Build trust through repeated, observable behavior over time.

PRACTICE STRATEGIES

- Consistently follow agreements and timelines
- Be reliable and do what you say you will do
- Provide information proactively (not only when asked)
- Use agreed-upon systems for communication and information sharing
- Demonstrate sustained behavior over time
- Acknowledge and repair when you fall short

“

*Trust isn't the intervention.
Trust is a possible outcome of predictability over time.*



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ATTEMPTED “CONTROL”

From Managing the Other Parent to Structure and Boundaries

THE PROBLEM



Attempted “Control”

Efforts to monitor, direct, or manage the other parent’s behavior, often driven by fear, mistrust, or a need for certainty.

COMMON EXAMPLES

- Demanding real-time updates or location sharing
- Repeated requests for unnecessary information
- Micromanaging parenting time or decisions
- Using children to monitor, report, or influence
- Imposing rules beyond the parenting agreement
- Escalating when the other parent does not comply



THE INTERVENTION



Structure & Boundaries

Establish clear, mutually agreed-upon structures to guide expectations, responsibilities, information sharing, and appropriate safeguards.

PRACTICE STRATEGIES

- Develop or clarify a detailed parenting plan and communication protocol
- Define what information will be shared, how, and when
- Set reasonable boundaries around privacy and autonomy
- Use consistent, structured systems (e.g., OurFamilyWizard)
- Focus on adult-to-adult communication
- Remove children from monitoring or enforcement roles
- Revisit and adjust structures as needed

“

Rather than trying to manage the other parent’s behavior, establish structures that create clarity, consistency, and safety for everyone.”



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ESCALATION

From Reactive Cycles to Containment

THE PROBLEM



Escalation

Tension, reactivity, and repeated conflict intensify over time, pulling the entire family system into distress.

COMMON EXAMPLES

- Rapid, emotional back-and-forth communication
- Multiple, lengthy texts or emails
- Arguing about past events
- Involving children in adult conflict
- Expanding issues beyond what is necessary
- Repeatedly bringing up the same topics
- Threats, ultimatums, or litigation as leverage



THE INTERVENTION



Containment

Slow the system down to reduce reactivity and create space for more thoughtful, child-focused decisions.

PRACTICE STRATEGIES

- Use a single, agreed-upon communication platform (e.g., OurFamilyWizard)
- Set response time expectations (e.g., 24 hours)
- Limit communication to necessary, child-related topics
- Avoid late-night or emotionally charged exchanges
- Use written, structured formats (brief, factual, respectful)
- Reduce unnecessary in-person contact
- Remove children from communication and monitoring roles
- Consider support from professionals (e.g., co-parenting counselor or parenting coordinator) when patterns persist

“

*A calmer process doesn't mean giving up.
It means protecting your child and creating the conditions for better decisions.*



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FROM PROMISES TO ACCOUNTABILITY

A Continuum of Change

MINIMIZATION



“It wasn’t that bad.”

- Downplays or denies the behavior
- Blames others or circumstances
- Avoids responsibility
- Maintains secrecy

ACKNOWLEDGMENT



“I understand what I did and how it affected you.”

- Recognizes the behavior and its impact
- Takes ownership
- Validates the other parent’s experience
- Begins to build trust through transparency

ACTION



“I’m doing something differently.”

- Implements concrete changes
- Follows through on agreements
- Uses agreed-upon systems and safeguards
- Demonstrates consistent behavior

ACCOUNTABILITY



“You can see the difference in my behavior over time.”

- Sustains changed behavior
- Is transparent, even when it’s difficult
- Repairs after setbacks
- Honors agreements
- Builds reliability and trust through consistent actions

“

Understanding the problem is not the same as changing the pattern.

Awareness is a start. Change happens through consistent, observable behavior.



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WHAT DOES ACCOUNTABILITY LOOK LIKE?

Observable Evidence of Change



Consistency

Behavior aligns with agreements and commitments over time.



Transparency

Provides accurate, timely information without being prompted.



Follow-Through

Takes the actions they say they will take and completes what they start.



Appropriate Safeguards

Uses agreed-upon structures to reduce risk and build trust.



Repair After Failures

Acknowledges setbacks, takes responsibility, and makes corrective actions.



Sustained Behavior Over Time

Demonstrates lasting change, not just short-term effort or improvement during a crisis.

“

*Accountability is not what someone promises after discovery.
It's what the system can observe over time.*



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RETURN TO THE PARALLEL REALITIES

Same Parents. A Different Lens.

Parent A

*"I've changed.
Why won't she let go
of the past?"*

Parent B

*"He lied for years.
How am I supposed
to trust him?"*

~~WHO'S RIGHT?~~

WHAT WOULD YOU DO NOW?

*The goal isn't to resolve the competing realities.
It's to identify what the system needs next.*



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FORMULATE BEFORE YOU INTERVENE

Key Questions for the Case



ASSESS

What are we really looking at?

- 1 What is the observable risk?
What behavior creates concern for safety, stability, or well-being?
- 2 What is primarily a trust rupture?
What behaviors have broken trust, even if they are not current risks?



STRUCTURE

What will create predictability?

- 3 What transparency is appropriate?
What information should be shared, by whom, and through what channel?
- 4 What creates predictability?
What agreements, routines, or communication protocols reduce uncertainty?
- 5 What is a reasonable safeguard versus monitoring?
How do we ensure safety and accountability without unnecessary intrusion?



PROTECT

How do we keep the focus where it belongs?

- 6 How do we remove the child from the loop?
What steps will keep the child out of the communication and monitoring system?
- 7 What would accountability look like?
What observable behaviors would demonstrate meaningful change over time?

“ Good intervention starts with a clear formulation, not a quick solution.



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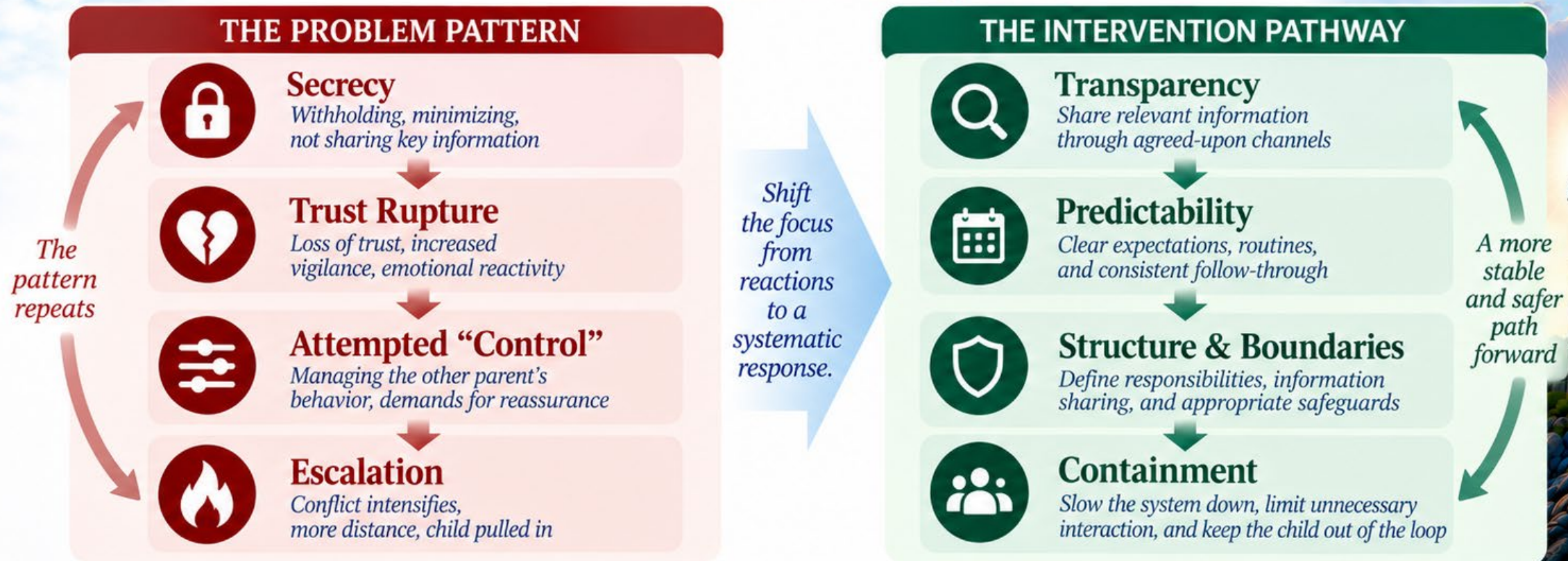
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APPLYING THE MODEL TO THE CASE

From a Stuck Pattern to a Different Path



Accountability = observable behavior over time.

*The intervention isn't deciding who's right.
The intervention is **changing what happens next**.*



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FROM FORMULATION TO INTERVENTION

A Practical Roadmap for the Next Case

*Different Perspectives.
Brighter Paths.*

1

Identify the hidden behavior



What is being concealed, minimized, disputed, or feared?

2

Assess observable impact



- Safety
- Parenting
- Reliability
- Finances
- Child involvement

3

Separate safety from trust



What requires protection now?

What reflects injury from the past?

4

Identify the loop



Where is the family currently stuck?

Recognize the secrecy–trust rupture–control–escalation pattern.

5

Match intervention to the pattern



- Transparency
- Predictability
- Structure & Boundaries
- Containment

6

Define accountability behaviorally



What would meaningful change actually look like?

Look for observable evidence over time.

7

Keep the child out of the regulatory system



Adults and systems carry the burden — not children.

Protect the child's well-being and relationships.

From understanding the pattern to creating a safer, more effective system.



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**CHANGE
THE PATTERN**

More Communication Is Not Always Better Communication

*Less
Reactivity.
More
Stability.*

In high-conflict co-parenting, the process matters more than the volume.



Is the information necessary?

Share only what is relevant to the child's well-being or required by agreement/court.



Does it need to be shared now?

Timing matters. Delayed or structured communication can reduce reactivity.



Who actually needs to know it?

Limit the audience. Keep information *between the parents (and professionals, if needed).*



What structure should carry it?

Use agreed-upon channels, clear protocols, and documented communication (e.g., OFW or designated email).



When the process is the problem, increasing the volume of communication may increase the problem.



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KNOW YOUR ROLE

Integrate. Don't Adjudicate.

*Different
Perspectives.
Brighter
Paths.*



Understand the pattern.

Look beyond the specific allegations to the broader process (e.g., secrecy, trust rupture, attempted control, escalation).

*Be a system thinker,
not a fact-finder.*



Assess impact and safety.

Focus on observable behaviors and current risks without assuming every trust rupture establishes present danger.

*Identify what requires
protection now versus
what reflects past injury.*



Create structure.

Help the family develop clear agreements, communication protocols, and predictable routines rather than becoming part of the monitoring system.

*Build the guardrails,
don't become the guardrail.*



Support accountability.

Encourage observable behavior change and follow-through without becoming the accountability mechanism yourself.

*Support the work,
but keep your clinical role.*

*The therapist's job is not to determine whose reality wins.
It is to help the system function more safely, predictably, and effectively.*



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CHANGE
THE PATTERN

THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

Key Takeaways for Your Work

*Different
Perspectives.
Brighter
Paths.*

1



**Don't confuse
the content
with the pattern.**

The argument may be about drinking, gambling, pornography, money, or a new relationship. Look for the process organizing the conflict.

2



**Trust isn't the
intervention.
Build predictability.**

Trust may emerge from consistent, observable behavior over time. Focus on transparency, predictability, structure, and accountability.

3



**Adults carry
accountability.
Children shouldn't
have to.**

Keep children out of the conflict, the communication loop, and the monitoring system. Adults—and systems—carry the burden of change.

Change the Pattern

*From "Who's right?" to
"What does this system need next?"*



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**STRONGER FAMILIES.
BRIGHTER TOMORROWS.**



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Thank You!

*Different Perspectives.
Brighter Paths.*

Change the Pattern

*From “Who’s right?” to
“What does this system need next?”*



Learn

New Perspectives



Apply

Practical Strategies



Support

Healthier Systems



Create

Brighter Futures

Presentation Handouts



Scan to access slides,
resources, and additional
materials.

*Stronger
Families.
Brighter
Tomorrows.*



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