

Family-Friendly Language

Words such as “possession,” “custody,” and “visitation” were never designed for parents, mental-health professionals, or educators. They were designed for judges and attorneys in a courtroom, and many states are even changing that. Legal professionals have been trained to use divisive terms throughout their education and practice, and unfortunately, parents, educators, and mental-health professionals have drawn their word usage from the legal profession. For example:

- “Fight for custody”
- “Custody battle”
- “Possession of your child”
- “Litigating the divorce”

The language used by individual parties, lawyers, and some mental-health professionals often promotes divisive and litigious conflict. The focus is on “termination” of the marriage, with only limited attention to restructuring the family. Misguided descriptions of the reconstituted family include terms such as “dysfunctional,” “damaged,” and “broken.” For example:

- Children growing up between two homes are often stereotyped, as is their family of origin, with terms such as “broken” or “fractured” family.
- Terms such as “broken family,” “your ex,” and “visitation” do not promote shared parenting or the strength of the restructured family.
- Therapists ask children, “What is your visitation schedule?”
- Teachers ask parents, “Who has custody of the children?”

I have worked with many families where the parents have remained in the same home, and some of these families have done far more damage to their children and are far more dysfunctional than some of the families I have worked with who are raising children between two homes.

Rather than emphasizing the end of the intimate relationship, you should use language that emphasizes your family’s strengths. Focus on the changes in the family system and the transition to a new way for your family to function. You and your coparent have the capacity to make your child’s future an expression of human resiliency and regenerative potential.

Change your words, and you may change your child’s world and the potential in your coparenting relationship. The following are some family-friendly words to consider using; try to encourage the family and professionals in your life to use these words as well:

- Replace the word “visit” with “other home.”
For example, when talking to your child, say, “When you are in your other home” rather than, “When you visit your mother,” or “When you are in your mom’s home.” If you are talking to someone else, instead of saying, “When they visit their father,” say, “When they are in their other home with their father.”
- Replace the word “custody” or “conservatorship” with “parenting.”
For example, instead of saying, “I have custody,” or “We have joint,” say, “We share the responsibility of parenting our child.”
- Replace the word “possession” with “parenting time.”
For example, instead of saying, “It’s my period of possession,” say, “It’s my parenting time.”
- Replace the words “my ex” with “my coparent” or “father”/ “mother.”
For example, instead of saying, “I need to call my ex-husband,” say, “I need to call my coparent,” or “I need to call her father.”
- Replace the words “custody arrangement” with the words “coparenting plan.”
For example, instead of saying, “Well, that’s our custody arrangement,” say, “We follow a coparenting plan.”
- Replace the words “my child” with “our child.”
For example, instead of saying, “You need to take my son to the doctor,” tell the other parent, “I think our son needs to see a doctor. Can you take him, or do you want me to take him?”