GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In constructing parenting plans, it is important to consider the following issues.

Empirical Research

There is extensive research in many areas relevant to child custody, summarized in the various chapters of this volume. The guidelines for child custody evaluations require that this research be considered in doing all evaluations. As explained in Chapters 3 and 4, only empirically-based evaluations will meet the criteria for custody evaluations and resolution of custody disputes.

Changes over Time

Children and their families are not static; they change dramatically over time, in areas such as:
- Child’s age-related activities, needs, and understanding of the separation,
- Health of parents and child,
- Residential location – neighborhood, school district, distance between parental homes,
- Re-coupling and re-marriage of parents – introducing step-parents, step-siblings, and other issues related to blended families.
The parenting plan may include provisions for anticipated changes. It is also advisable to include provisions for assessing the changing situation and implementing unanticipated changes. The more conflict there is in a family, the more professional assistance will be needed at these times of transition.

**PARENTAL CONFLICT**

As discussed in Chapter 8, high levels of inter-parental hostility are detrimental to child adjustment. In order to assess the levels and types of parental conflict, it is helpful to consider the issues in Box 28 in order to ascertain:

- **Type** of conflict: legal, attitudinal, or interpersonal
- **Areas** where conflict is focused, and interaction among areas
- **Level** or severity of conflict
- **Timing** of conflict: date of beginning, duration
- **Function** of conflict in family: who initiates, and why
- **Understanding of conflict** displayed by each party

All of these issues should be addressed as a natural part of the interviews and observations done during the evaluation. Usually the level of inter-parental conflict is obvious to the evaluator and other professionals involved with the family. If you have any uncertainly, simply review the issues in Box 28 to clarify the level of conflict.

The characteristics of each family’s inter-parental conflict are important in developing an effective parenting plan. If the inter-parental conflict began well before the separation, for instance, it is more apt to continue and even increase post-separation because it indicates that the couple has poor communication and conflict-resolution skills. Who initiates the conflict is also crucial, for the conflict may be part of an attempt to control the partner, or it may be due to severe anxiety aroused by the separation, or it may even be inspired by overly zealous professionals involved in the adversarial legal process.

If couples have low conflict and adequate conflict-resolution skills, they are good candidates for parenting plans that require direct inter-parental contact, joint decision-making, and coordination of parenting activities. Couples with moderate conflict should have