CO-PARENTING DIVORCE GUIDE

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For most people, divorce is much more than a major legal process: it's also a challenging time of transition that can negatively impact virtually every area of life: emotional, psychological, domestic, parental, financial, physical health, social, and vocational.

This special **Co-Parenting Divorce Guide** contains hand-picked articles, book excerpts, advice, and more to help you recover from the inevitable stresses and pressures of divorce. And, just as importantly, the Guide empowers you to build a satisfying, strong relationship with your children and ex-spouse.

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Tips for Successful Co-Parenting

As a co-parent, there are things you must do — but may not want to do — in order to act in the best interest of your children. Here are 15 tips to help you become a great co-parent.

By Deesha Philyaw and Michael D. Thomas

A co-parent's work is never done. Not only must you avoid the minefield of negative behaviors that can undermine your parenting partnership, but it's in your children's best interest for you to adopt civil and conciliatory behaviors as well. The following action-oriented guidelines make cooperative, kid-centered parenting across two households possible.

1. Know Which Pitches to Swing At

Don't swing at everything that's pitched. Disagreements, misunderstandings, and conflict are inevitable, even when both co-parents are committed to being cooperative. Knowing which pitches to swing at – and which to let pass – is the key to your peace of mind as a co-parent.

2. Be the "Bigger" Co-Parent

Even when you're not swinging at everything your ex pitches, it's still possible to get burned out from co-parenting, especially when your co-parent isn't pulling his weight. When that happens, your child needs you to be the "bigger" co-parent – which means doing the right thing for your child regardless of what your co-parent does or doesn't do.

3. Take Responsibility

When your children witness you at a less-than-proud co-parenting moment (it happens to all co-parents), let them also see you not blame the other parent for it. Instead, take full responsibility for your actions. You can't control other people, but you can control yourself.

4. Be Flexible

While children thrive on the consistency and stability a schedule provides, there are times when a little flexibility can go a long way in the best interest of your kids. Usually, if you weigh the pros (the kids get to go on a special trip) and the cons (they will be with him during my time), you'll find that your flexibility is worth it because your kids are worth it.

5. Lose the Sense of Entitlement

A common roadblock to cooperative co-parenting occurs when one parent feels entitled to more parenting time than the other. The entitled parent considers himself the real parent or the better parent. He wants the other parent to go away, or he tries to act as a gatekeeper to the child. You may believe your ex's infidelity or character flaws render her undeserving of time and closeness with your child, but your child deserves and has a right to this relationship.

6. Enjoy Your Child-Free Time

Consider it a glass-half-full approach to co-parenting. Although you miss your child when she is with the other parent, your co-parenting arrangement affords you child-free time that's yours for the taking.

Some co-parents struggle with deep sadness when their children are with the other parent, even in the absence of safety concerns. They feel as if they are missing out on parts of their children's childhoods, or this aspect of their divorce is unfair. We encourage them to acknowledge and work through those feelings and also to see the situation through their children's eyes.

7. Respect Your Child's Relationship with the Other Parent

Regardless of what happened in your marriage or since the breakup, your child has a right to have a relationship with both parents if both are fit and willing – without micromanagement or interference from the other parent. Divorce brings a lot of change and uncertainty for children, but having a relationship with both parents is one thing they should be able to count on, enjoy, and not feel conflicted about. Try to be a gateway, not a gatekeeper.

8. Encourage Your Child to Respect the Other Parent

The best way to encourage your child to respect the other parent is to demonstrate that respect yourself. Respect does not equal agreement; you may disagree with your ex's parenting style, her religious beliefs and practices, whom she dates, and other choices, but short of any harm coming to your child, you can still show respect for (or at least hold your tongue about) them.

9. Keep the Lines of Communication Open

Co-parenting isn't possible without some level of communication. Using children as messengers isn't an option, so co-parents must be willing to stay in touch and share information. If face-to-face and telephone communication proves too volatile, some co-parents use email or texting. But remember that with email and texting you don't have the benefit of tone of voice, facial expression, or other nonverbal clues to soften words that might otherwise sound harsh.

10. See Your Ex through Your Child's Eyes

If negative feelings about your child's other parent just won't subside, try seeing him through your child's eyes. A child looks at a parent, warts and all, with love. You may no longer share these feelings, but the other parent remains central to your child's life and well-being. So when you interact with your ex, do so as you would with any person who is important to your child — with respect and civility.

11. Mind Your Business

Anything that happens in your ex's personal life or during his parenting time that doesn't harm your kids is no longer your concern. If you do believe something is going on that is harmful or potentially harmful, communicate your concerns to your ex, acknowledging his right to privacy, right to discipline, and right to make decisions regarding your child's welfare. If you share legal custody this also includes health, education, and religion.

12. Move On

Simply put, though not simple to do: let go of the old relationship. Doing so frees you to be a fully engaged parent and a more cooperative co-parent.

13. Turn Over a New Leaf

Each day, each interaction, is an opportunity to repair and rebuild a damaged co-parenting relationship. How you started is not how you're destined to end. For your child's sake, be willing to extend (and accept) olive branches.

14. Offer (or ask for) Forgiveness

Many of the dos and don'ts we're sharing may sound impossible given the intense feelings and fallout many co-parents experience in the wake of a breakup. What helped us and other co-parents get to a place where we could focus primarily on our children (and not each other) was a clear separation between our past marital relationship and our current parenting partnership. We consider our old relationship dead and buried. When unresolved issues from this relationship "rise from the dead," we think of them as zombies that can terrorize our parenting partnership. That's pretty dramatic imagery, but some co-parents have found it helps them envision what's stopping them from moving forward as a team. One thing that can help keep the walking dead of your old relationship at bay is forgiveness.

15. Look to the Future

Your child won't be a child forever. If you're wrangling with the other parent right now over issues related to your child, these may no longer be issues when your young child becomes a teen or when your teen becomes an adult. But adulthood isn't necessarily the end of your connection to your ex, if you factor in higher education, weddings, and grandchildren. Will your present co-parenting conflicts even matter then? Do they really matter now, in the grand scheme of things? ■

This article has been adapted with permission from Co-parenting 101: Helping Your Kids Thrive in Two Households after Divorce (*New Harbinger Publications, 2013), by Deesha Philyaw and Michael D. Thomas Michael Thomas works in the financial services industry and is the co-founder of CoParenting101.org. Deesha Philyaw is a writer whose work has appeared in the Washington Post and has been anthologized in book such as Literary Mama: Reading for the Maternally Inclined.* www.newharbinger.com

The Co-parenting Relationship

Your marriage may be over, but your relationship with the other parent will continue as long as both you and your children are alive. Healthy co-parenting is a way to carry your children through the crisis of divorce to a safe and happy future.

By Darlene Weyburne

Imagine waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of your smoke alarm blaring. Your first instinct would be to run to your children's room, scoop them up, and carry them to safety. You'd probably walk through smoke and fire, or any crisis, risking your own life to save your children. Divorce is a crisis for your children, and they need you to work together with the other parent to help them through it. Your marriage may not have survived the fire, but your relationship with the other parent will continue as long as your children are alive.

Whether you spend one day a month or every day with your children, you and your former partner continue to be co-parents. Co-parenting involves working cooperatively to assist your children in developing into socially and emotionally healthy adults. It involves communicating with one another concerning the needs of the children. Cooperative co-parenting means considering your children's need to love both parents instead of focusing on your feelings toward your ex-spouse. You do this because you understand that your children's need to see the other parent is more important than your need to punish him or her. Healthy co-parenting is a way to carry your children through the crisis of divorce to safety.

Picture your child on her wedding or graduation day as she looks out at the family and friends who have gathered to witness the event. Will she be focusing on how happy she feels or will she be worrying about whether her parents are going to fight? Throughout the rest of your life, you and your former partner will be parents and grandparents – and maybe even great-grandparents – together. You can struggle and fight your way through each developmental milestone in your children's lives or you can learn to celebrate them together.

Developing Respect

Developing mutual respect for each other will help make you effective co-parents. Follow the golden rule of co-parenting: treat the other parent like you want to be treated. This can be difficult if he or she doesn't treat you with respect, but keep in mind that you're doing this for your children's survival and happiness – not for the other parent's benefit. Don't snicker or sneer at something your ex says or something your child relays to you, and don't attempt to convey to your children that you're the better parent. If you're worried that showing mutual respect will confuse your children into thinking that their parents will get back together, avoid talking to your children about your feelings towards your ex: focus instead on his or her positive qualities as a parent.

To help you develop respect for the other parent, take a notebook and write down three instances in which he or she did well in the parental role. (For example: showing up on time for parenting time, praising your daughter for a good score on a test, attending your son's

concert, or agreeing to pay for half of the cost of school pictures.)

Supporting Your Children's Relationship with Your Ex

"It was hard for me to hear Crystal tell Mark what a good daddy he was," says Sue, the mother of a five-year-old girl. "I felt that if he was such a good dad he would have tried harder to make the marriage work. Despite how I felt, I didn't tell my daughter what a lousy father I thought he was for leaving us. I knew that she would adjust better to the divorce if I encouraged her to have a good relationship with him."

Support your children in loving and building a relationship with the other parent. Never start a sentence with "If your father/mother really loved you..." Don't allow your feelings of being betrayed to interfere with your support of your children's need to love and be loved by your former partner. Just as you're able to love a new baby without loving your other children less, your children can love more than one parent. If your child phones you while he or she is with the other parent, don't ask, "Do you miss me?" or, "Do you want to come home?" As painful as it may be for you, remember that your children are home when they're with your ex. They'll develop healthier relationships if they don't have to choose between loving you and loving their other parent.

Encourage other family members to support your children in having a relationship with the other parent. After a divorce, some extended families demand that the children remain loyal to one parent, and they say hostile things about the other parent in front of the children. This can only hurt your children.

Your children also need to continue to have a relationship with both sets of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Allow them to spend time with extended family and encourage them to phone and write letters. Make a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers of family and friends who love your children. Give your children a copy of this list and encourage them to call, write letters, or e-mail these people whenever they wish.

One grandmother, after her grandchildren moved out of state, made a mini-photo album of their time together each time her grandchildren came to visit. She kept one copy and mailed another copy to each of her grandchildren.

Don't criticize your ex's family, friends, or new spouse in front of your children. If you think your ex's family members are badmouthing you, speak directly to them about it. Demonstrate to your children, through your behaviour, that the negative things they say about you aren't true.

Communicating About Important Issues

Major decisions should be made jointly. This includes major medical, dental, and psychological treatment; grade and special-education placement; or change of schools. Both parents should have access to physicians, therapists, educators, law-enforcement personnel, or other professionals that are involved with your children. Inform the other parent, in advance, of any scheduled meetings with these professionals.

Create a school folder that travels back and forth with each of your children between visits. The folder should include notes from teachers, homework, schoolwork, report cards, sport schedules, flyers about upcoming events, and information concerning school pictures, open houses, or parent-teacher conferences.

Communicate to your children's teachers and school counsellors that you have set up this system, and encourage them to place items directly in the folder. The cooperative effort between you, the other parent, and the school can enhance your children's academic achievement and emotional adjustment. Don't include any notes to the other parent from you. If your children are having problems at school, communicate this to the other parent by phone, through the mail, or in person.

Whenever possible, you should consider helping out in the classroom. Sharing your skills and knowledge with your children's class helps your children feel special, and it can facilitate communication between you and the school. For example, my children's father does chemistry experiments one day each year in each of our children's classrooms. Our children take great pride in these demonstrations.

If possible, both parents should go to school and sporting events. School open houses, concerts, plays, recitals, and sports allow children an opportunity to be the center of attention, which builds their self-esteem. Your children already feel different from children whose parents are still together; try not to make their lives more difficult by refusing to attend any event if your ex will be there.

"When my teacher said, 'Make sure your parents come to the open house,' it was easy for the other kids," says Bonita, aged 15. "They just had to remember to tell their parents about it. I had to decide which parent to invite and what excuse I was going to make up to explain why the other parent wasn't there." Knowing that both parents will attend school functions will help your children feel more normal. (If you live in a distant city, of course, your children won't expect you to turn up at every event. But make sure to attend the big ones: graduation, wedding, etc.) Don't use these events to discuss problems with the other parent. It's humiliating for your children to see you argue in public. If avoiding an argument with the other parent is too difficult or if it's too painful to sit together, sit in another area of the auditorium or classroom. Remember that these events are celebrations of your children's achievements. Your children deserve the privilege of having both parents involved.

Jenny, eight, was hit by a car while riding her bike. Her dad called her mom right away and told her what hospital

they were going to. "I almost didn't call Catherine (Jenny's mom) because I knew she would blame me for the accident. The look on Jenny's face when she saw her mom come into the emergency room, however, told me I had done the right thing by calling. Jenny was in a lot of pain and very scared. She needed both of us to hold her hands as the doctor put on the cast." Every parent is aware that accidents happen and crises occur. In an emergency, your children need both parents more than ever. They need you to put your energy into helping them heal rather than blaming the other parent for the injury or illness. If your children get hurt and need medical attention, call the other parent immediately. Tell the other parent about major events that occur while your children are with you. This information can assist the other parent in helping your children through life's tragedies.

Child Support

Child support is another important issue that requires open communication between the parents. Pay your child support! You may not want to give money to your former partner, but your children could feel unwanted if you don't pay your child support. Of course, you should never discuss child support with your children. If you don't have enough money to buy them something, tell them you don't have it. You don't have to explain why. Use this opportunity to teach money management skills.

"Every time Dad was late sending the check, Mom wouldn't let us go see him. It was so unfair. Why should we be punished because she was mad at him?" asks Pamela, aged 12. Don't refuse to allow your children to see the other parent for non-payment of child support. Even though you may depend on this money, threatening to withhold parenting time hurts your children. It helps to remember that spending time with both parents is a basic need for your children rather than a privilege that the other parent must earn. Telling your children that they can't see the other parent until the child support is paid is like refusing to feed your daughter until her brother cleans his room. Your children cannot control their parents' actions. They have done nothing wrong and need to be with both parents.

If you're unsuccessful in talking to the other parent about overdue child support, consult with a family therapist or an attorney. However, be extremely cautious about taking your ex to court. Legal battles are often drawn out and emotionally and financially costly for parents and their children.

"When my mom remarried, we moved onto David's farm," says Callia, aged 14. "My dad was really mad because it meant I was going to go to a different school. He thought my going to some 'hick' school was going to hurt my chances of getting into college. He took my mom to court and got the judge to stop her from switching schools until the court date in December. For the first half of the year, my mom had to drive me to my old school. The judge finally decided that the school near David's house was just as good as my old one so I had to switch schools in the middle of the year. What a pain! I think Dad was just jealous that Mom finally found someone she could be happy with."

Legal battles between parents are usually emotionally damaging to the children. Clearly evaluate your reasons for initiating a court proceeding. Is it really your only option? People sometimes use these battles as a way of maintaining their severed relationship to avoid the pain and unhappiness that may come with the realization that the relationship is really over. Accept that the marriage has ended and move on. If you drag the other parent through court, you will drag and possibly scar your children, too.

Mediation and Co-parenting

A mediator can guide the parents through the divorce process and help them reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. The mediator then usually writes up a summary of this agreement for the parents to review with their attorneys. Mediation is a good option for parents who are planning on co-parenting for the following reasons:

- It facilitates compromise and cooperation rather than competition between parents.
- It gives the parents – who know their children best – rather than the judge the power to make decisions about their children.
- It helps avoid court battles that often have negative emotional consequences for you and your children.
- It saves time and money.
- It assists parents in making decisions based on what is in the children's best interest rather than on emotions.
- It helps clarify issues and reduce anger and bitterness.

The mediator can also help you work out a tentative parenting plan that will outline when your children will be with each parent. Try this plan out for a month or two before putting it in your settlement agreement. At the end of the trial period, discuss with the other parent any changes either of you feel are needed, and revise your plan. If your children have concerns about the parenting time schedule, let them know that you'll listen and consider their thoughts and feelings. In your notebook, write down any questions you can think of that you'd like to ask a mediator.

A final tip: at the mediation session, put a photograph of your children on the table. This will help you focus on their needs rather than on your feelings about the other parent. ■

This article has been excerpted from What To Tell the Kids about Your Divorce (*New Harbinger Publications 1999), by Darlene Weyburne, BCD, CSW, ACSW. Offering creative exercises and common-sense advice, this comprehensive guide will assist you to move beyond your own anger so you can help your kids cope with your divorce.* www.newharbinger.com

Making Co-Parenting EASIER

You can ease the challenge of co-parenting with an ex-spouse by planning ahead and seeking professional help if necessary. Here are five tips to help make co-parenting easier post-divorce.

By Brian James

When parents divorce, it is the beginning of a new partnership in co-parenting their children. Co-parenting goes much more smoothly when there is a plan in place; it assures that no matter how you feel about your ex-spouse, the children's interests will come first.

It's important to determine if you and your ex-spouse are comfortable enough to communicate directly about co-parenting issues regarding the children. If you're able to talk through things on your own, that's terrific; however, if you find it too difficult, don't feel frustrated. Mediators and therapists can help you to discuss co-parenting issues that you may have trouble talking about on your own.

Here are five keys to making post-divorce co-parenting easier:

1. Put Your Co-Parenting Plan in Writing in the Divorce Agreement.

The more you lay out parenting terms in writing, the less room there is for disagreement down the road. A little pre-planning can save you court battles and lawyer fees later.

2. Decide Who Will Pay For Which Expenses in Advance.

Rather than splitting every cost as it comes up, try to divide who will pay for which expenses ahead of time. For instance, the father may choose to cover football expenses for the son, while the mother agrees to cover the piano lessons for the daughter. Again, if you have a hard time dividing this up on your own, a divorce mediator or parenting coordinator can help you.

3. Discuss the Best Ways to Have the Kids Meet New Romantic Partners.

This issue is easier to discuss before there is actually someone new in the picture. Having an agreement on parent-dating etiquette in your divorce agreement can save a lot of problems down the road.

4. Hold Regular Meetings to Stay on Track.

Regular meetings (in-person, over the phone, or via email) allow both parents to stay up-to-date with new situations as they arise with the kids.

5. It's Okay to Ask for Professional Help.

Don't feel badly if you need a professional to help you work out your co-parenting differences. When tensions run high, it can be hard to put feelings aside and make decisions. Hiring a mediator can help you get back on track and focus on how to help your kids in the situation. Having parents stand together on a parenting front can bring a huge amount of security to the kids.

No one ever said that working together as a team to parent your children after divorce would be easy. Both spouses need to be dedicated to their role as parents and willing to compromise. Hiring a mediator can help parents make the children a top priority. It's very common for parents to have disagreements after divorce when terms are not mapped out in the divorce agreement and they are having trouble communicating calmly. When one is needed, a trained mediator can help parents get past the emotions at hand and find solutions that truly are best for their children. ■

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Mom's House, Dad's House

If you ask their opinion, children will almost always choose a two-parent, two-home alternative over a one-home arrangement with the other parent as a visitor or – worse yet – gone from the scene entirely. Here's how to meet the challenges of setting up two happy homes for your children.

By Dr. Isolina Ricci

Parents who set up two homes for their children often make comments like "It made me feel I was a real parent again" or "I knew what I was doing and the children could feel it." When necessary steps are taken to reclaim certain responsibilities for our children, normal parenting is resumed. We can break through some of these sex-typed barriers that have said that men cannot be nurturing and responsive or that mothers who set up another home have "given up their children" and have something intrinsically wrong with them.

When parents establish a working relationship, their children can feel that Mom and Dad are on top of this life crisis and that things are going to be okay. Then even perhaps, "Uh-oh, I guess that also means they are each going to get my report card!"

A Sense of Belonging: My Own Things

The common grumble of parents when children return from being with their other parent is that some item — a favourite toy or a jacket — has been left behind. The first, knee-jerk reaction becomes: the other parent or the child has been inconsiderate, thoughtless, or deliberately provoking. Actually, this forgetfulness probably stems from the child's need to stake a claim to some territory to create a sense of belonging in his or her newer home.

Children will know they belong in two homes when they no longer need a large suitcase to go from one home to another. This holds true no matter how much or how little time they spend in one home. The time spent doesn't matter, the sense of belonging does.

Children need their own space and are entitled to privacy. Even a drawer they share at the bottom of their parent's dresser can help. They need their own non-transferable toilet articles and two or three changes of clothes. They need their own place for toys and personal effects and a place to sleep. Some personal things belong in each home and stay there. Sleeping bags rolled up in a closet can be good beds if these are their own sleeping bags. A house, a yard, and an extra bedroom are just trimmings. The sense of "my own things, here" matters. So does a trust that their things will remain protected in their absence.

Many dual-home parents simply take their offspring shopping for new clothing, sleeping bags, and toilet articles. These purchases offer a way to participate in the organization of their

new, other home. When money is very tight, perhaps parents can agree on which of the child's articles of clothing and personal belongings can be transferred permanently from one home to the other. Whenever possible, honour the children's preferences. If they want to carry their favourite pajamas back and forth, let them. They may change their minds after a week or two and make a switch. This maneuver usually tests out Mom's and Dad's reactions, a trial-and-error way to learn what will feel best but also what the parents will accept. Allow reasonable time to try out different schemes; observe what is easy and comfortable for the children and then agree on rules. "Usually one or two things transfer," said one parent. "Our eldest wears the same hat back and forth. Our youngest carries his blanket and teddy bear." Remember, when your children have their clothes and things in two homes you also get rid of the "suitcase conversation" with the other parent.

Groundwork

Groundwork designates the time parent and child take walking together around the new home(s), exploring, familiarizing themselves with landmarks, meeting neighbours and potential playmates, discovering busy streets, and – most important – determining boundaries for roaming without an adult. Groundwork is the most basic settling-in work that the parent and child must do in a new neighbourhood, but it is often the most ignored task of parenting. It should be done by each parent at each home and benefits are widespread and long-lasting.

Lecturing the child as you march over the ground won't do the job. Nor is this an activity to be delegated to nannies or sitters. Parent and child do it together. As with other shared activities, your child has an opportunity to tell you what he or she thinks. Groundwork promotes a sense of security and can also show the neighbours that you are a caring parent.

One parent admitted her shame at living in the same place for four years and never walking the neighbourhood with her daughters. "I realized I had been a four-wheel parent; if I didn't see it from the car coming into our driveway or going out of it, it didn't exist. I didn't know the names of my neighbours two houses down!" When the parent walks these routes with the children, he or she can exchange phone numbers with parents of potential playmates and friendly local merchants. When Dad sends Eric to the store or neighbourhood market for bread and Eric has not returned after a reasonable time, Dad – because he took a minute to get the market's number and to introduce Eric to the manager – can phone and ask if Eric has been there.

Such groundwork establishes an automatic neighbourhood watch for your children. Children gain a sense of security and of belonging; their parents gain peace of mind and real information about the neighbourhood. Groundwork may take a few hours, but it pays off again and again in security and continuity for you and your children.

Healthy Parenting Patterns

1. Parents frequently share information about their child. Written notes, voice mail, and e-mail often substitute for one-on-one talks.
2. Parents' communications are respectful, usually businesslike and direct. No verbal messages are sent through the children.
3. Parents keep the child out of the middle of their problems with one another, and there is no neighbourhood "soap opera."
4. Each parent supports the other parent's relationship with the child and helps the child feel free to love both of them.
5. Parents provide the child the environment, support, and love to develop normally – physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Order in the House

A predictable, orderly structure for at least some things is especially important when people are in crisis or having a difficult time. Parents feeling anxious, sad, remorseful, or angry can let daily routines and household organization go downhill rapidly during their own times of crisis. A little occupational therapy is in order. Pick yourself up and recover a bare minimum working order in your house. Establish a routine everyone follows for getting ready in the morning, preparing and eating meals, doing homework, buying groceries and gas, transporting kids to school or to Little League, for rest and play, and for going to bed. Everyone needs to know what to expect.

Paying attention to household management may sound like a dull remedy for the aches and pains of separation or depression, but both common sense and research support this approach as fundamental to calming fears and to the development of a new stability. A sensible routine, with regular meals and regular times for shared recreation, translates into "home," being cared about, and a sense of security. "Knowing my kids needed that routine forced me to be orderly for at least part of my week," said John. "Even when I didn't think I could make dinner or read that bedtime story, I did it. It actually did make things easier – not only for them, but for me, too."

This family and others who ordered their lives early on – despite their difficulties – seem to have an easier time of readjusting overall. A sensible routine not only feels safe, it also allows our minds and bodies to calm down and heal.

House Rules and Your Parenting Style

Parenting apart means setting up your own House Rules and settling into your own style. This can be liberating, especially if you felt the other parent used to look over your shoulder too much. Many times more than one parent, often the father, has reported that he is enjoying his children more and

feeling a rapport and depth of feeling for them that had escaped him earlier.

You can start with House Rules that reflect your expectations as well as those of the children. "If I want to take the phone off the hook during dinner, I can." "If I want to have a quiet period for reading or headphone stereo listening after nine p.m., I can write it into the blueprint." Some advice: if your natural inclination is to be a relaxed and permissive parent, consider tightening up with a routine at least during your first year. Many children interpret limits as a reflection of their parents' personal stability and as caring for their well-being. You can provide the leadership for a set of House Rules reached in a family powwow that promotes safety, health, and privacy for everyone. These House Rules can be revised anytime you think is wise.

House Rules at the Other Home

Common sense tells you that the more House Rules you have in common with the other parent, the better. It's less confusing to the children and more supportive for the parents. But it would be rare for both parents to have exactly the same House Rules. Try to have the same or close to the same rules for the main organization of the child's day – for example, bedtime periods, when to do homework, TV watching, and curfews.

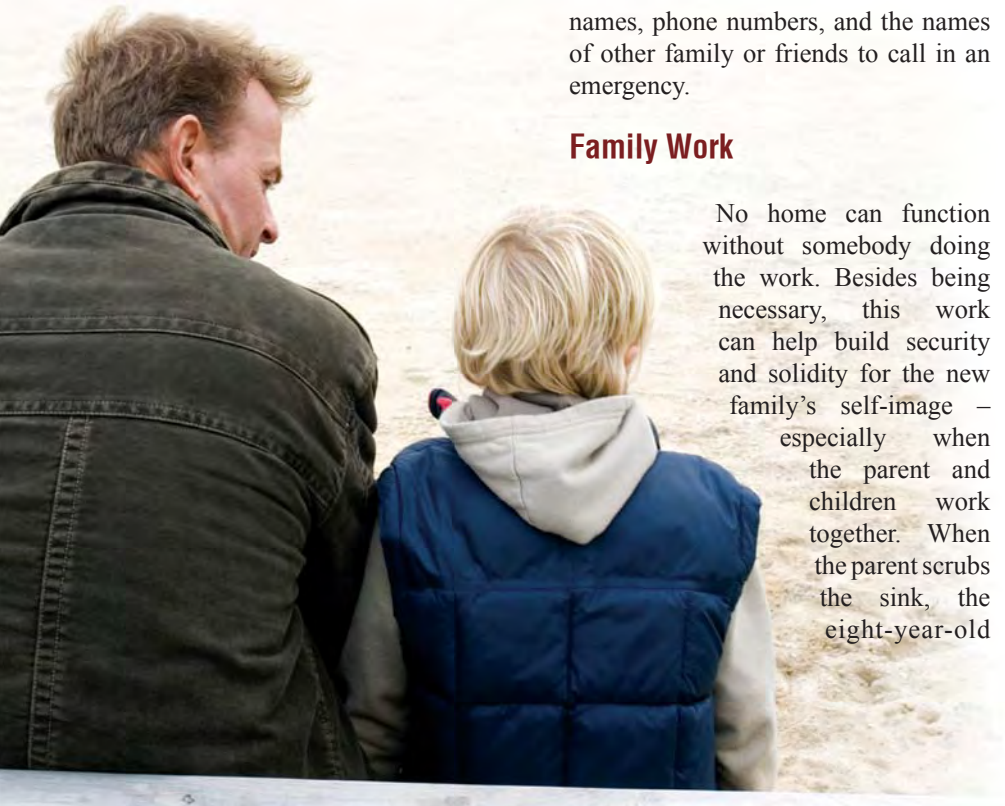
Eating Meals Together

Do it. Families that eat together usually do better, especially the children. This is a time to ask how the day went, to share jokes, ideas, hardships, hopes. To be acknowledged, listened to, and listen to others is to feel like a family. Turn off the TV. This is the time to talk together, even if the kids aren't all that interested. They will be, eventually.

Safety Rules

Each home, regardless of how the children's time is divided, has basic safety needs. You need a clearly legible list of important numbers: the doctor's, friends', and neighbours', as well as numbers for emergency, fire, and police. Parents should familiarize children with fire escapes, routes in case of earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, fire, or other disasters. Set up meeting places for the family if separated. Please do not overlook these essential routines. There's no need to alarm very young children with details of such information. But they should memorize their own addresses and last names, phone numbers, and the names of other family or friends to call in an emergency.

Family Work



No home can function without somebody doing the work. Besides being necessary, this work can help build security and solidity for the new family's self-image – especially when the parent and children work together. When the parent scrubs the sink, the eight-year-old daughter puts away the dishes, and the ten-year-old vacuums, the burden of housework is lightened by teamwork and the growth of a new family feeling.

Participation builds solidarity, as all athletes who play team sports know well. Children of any age need the satisfaction of doing a job in cooperation with Mom or Dad. Children's family work is not a form of cheap labour for unpleasant tasks, but a preparation for an independent life as an adult. Completed tasks remind children that they belong; that they are functioning family members, trusted, appreciated, and most of all, needed to keep the household running. "I feel guilty having the children do work," said a parent. His misplaced guilt won't make them feel at home, but simple tasks and the resumption of a more realistic parenting pattern will.

Children in divorced families often grow more realistic about the relationship between caring and sharing, about how things get done in the grownup world. When children help cook meals, do the laundry, clean the house, shop, and eat the meal they helped prepare, they know what their work accomplished. A sense of mastery and increased self-confidence can grow. Children such as these seem to be more independent at an earlier age than are children from families that have never faced adversity or reorganization.

How decisions are made about family work and family rules is different in each family. Some parents prefer to make all the decisions, others allow their children to decide. A good midpoint leaves certain areas open to discussion, but the parent reserves the right to make the final decisions, while the other areas are discussed openly by all with each child's preference given as much priority as possible. ■

Dr. Isolina Ricci is a renowned marriage and family therapist, educator, and mediator. Dr. Ricci is the founder and director of Custody & CoParenting Solutions, and CoParentingToday.com.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR

PARENTING PLAN

By Jill Burrett and Michael Green

A well-constructed and principled parenting plan can help you through tough times.

A parenting plan might contain some or all of the following elements:

- The parents' philosophy and attitudes regarding their care of the children;
- An acknowledgment of responsibilities for the welfare of the children;
- Daily decisions and more major ones that require consultation;
- Where everyone will live;
- What time or times the children will spend with each parent, grandparents, and so on;
- The importance of maintaining relationships with parents and others;
- How travel between homes will occur;
- The schools, school activities, and extra-curricular programs;
- Arrangements for vacations, holidays, and other special days;
- Special needs regarding medication, education, clothes, or equipment;
- Financial arrangements, including extra expenses;
- Communication between the two parents and sharing information about the children;
- Communication between the parents and the children via telephone, email, and so on;
- Appointment of a mediator/coordinator to deal with disputes;
- A specified time for a review of the plan;
- Additional agreements, for example, not to discuss money in the presence of children, and so on.

For parents who find it impossible to get along, parallel parenting can work. That means each household has its own set of rules, and the parents have a minimum of contact and communication.

Collaborative Parenting Plans

This type of plan will work for separated parents who can treat one another with decency and sensitivity, who acknowledge the importance of both parents to the children, and who work hard to foster all the relationships that are important for their children. They talk to one another regularly about the children. Their children's friends are welcome in either home. In some cases they come together for Christmas, birthday parties, and the like. Many separated parents are doing this!

No matter how well you are getting on with your ex-partner, a written parenting plan is still a valuable asset. Even in the most amicable of separated

households, misunderstandings arise. People (even children) are different and sometimes difficult. Circumstances change; unexpected things happen. The separated family is a special family and calls for special effort. At times it's easy for the best of parents to lose heart, to feel exhausted, to wonder if their efforts are worthwhile.

A well-constructed and principled parenting plan can help you through tough times. You can take it out and read it again. You can discuss it with your ex-partner or your children. It will help you renew your commitment and maybe your enthusiasm. A key feature of a collaborative parenting plan is the commitment of both parents to consult one another on issues that affect the children, their welfare and development.

Q: I'm finding what to do about the children's arrangements incredibly difficult. I feel so upset for them. I don't trust their father to do the right thing by them. I don't want to have anything to do with him. I don't want them staying overnight with his girlfriend there, and I want him to feed them properly and stick to sensible bedtimes. Can I have this in a parenting plan?

A: You can have very specific details in your plan, and so can he. There's no limit to what you can have. If you feel he's out of touch with their routines, inform him, perhaps with the help of a mediator if talking with him is uncomfortable for you. You could also write lists for him, as appendices to a plan. While everyone gets used to the separation, you could suggest he spend his time with them without his partner. Try to approach the creation of your plan with an open mind, inviting him to draw up as many clauses as he wants. Work out what issues you want to be consulted on, and aim to set out the arrangements very specifically so you don't need to have much contact with him. You may be well advised to have a neutral third party as a pick-up and drop-off person, so you don't have to see him, and the children don't sense your discomfort.

Parallel Parenting Plans

For parents who find it impossible to get along, parallel parenting can work. That means each household has its own set of rules, and the parents have a minimum of contact and communication. One thing they agree on is the children have two parents and they are going to spend some time in each household according to a determined schedule.

The essential ingredient in such a plan is the commitment of both parents to stick to the terms of their agreement. Moreover, the plan will need to be extremely detailed to cope not only with the children's day-to-day timetables, but also to foresee and deal with unexpected changes and hiccups.

Where there is ongoing hostility between separated parents and little or no communication, a written parenting plan is essential. With it, and with a firm commitment to abide by the rules, shared parenting can still work. Without it, misunderstandings and confusion will inevitably arise and children will suffer.

Sure, there will be problems, even after implementing the most carefully structured parenting plan. Life's like that! It's never smooth or uneventful, whether your family is intact or separated. ■

This article has been edited and excerpted with permission from Shared Parenting: Raising Your Children Cooperatively After Separation *(Ten Speed Press 2009), by Jill Burrett and Michael Green.*

Jill Burrett is a psychologist with over 30 years of experience helping parents manage family changes. Michael Green is a lawyer who runs a mediation practice specializing in family conferencing and dispute resolution.

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Conflict & Parenting:

Customize Your Post-Separation Parenting Relationship

By Janice Shaw

When you go to the library or browse through a book store, there are many books for divorcing parents, most of which have some version of the following message: "You must communicate with the other parent for the children's sake, no matter how you feel about him/her." In this context, communication usually means talking directly to the other parent.

This is a useful, in fact helpful, message if parents are able to do so and if talking together does not place the listener or their children at risk. In high-conflict families, however, the message often remains the same without regard to the realities of these families. In high-conflict or abusive relationships, alternative interaction models between parents are essential.

Lower-conflict families need information and skill-building aimed at a more "direct contact" mode of communication. In these families, parents can often engage in frequent and direct dialogue; they can "co-parent". Higher conflict families need information about a "low- to no-contact" approach between parents; they need to "parallel-parent". Parallel parenting can be compared to train tracks. The rails of a train track run consistently side by side, never touching, yet still effectively helping to move the train from one place to another. Similarly, parents can parent in a parallel fashion, never communicating directly yet still successfully raising their mutual child.

Studies consistently indicate that divorce itself does not cause emotional and behavioural problems in children. It is the degree of conflict that determines the child's adjustment. Parents must find some way to cooperate to minimize conflict for the sake of the children.

Parents often wonder how they can possibly cooperate during periods of high conflict. But cooperation doesn't have to mean being "best friends" or even talking directly. Using distancing techniques such as respectful e-mail, voicemail, or fax messages assists parents in maintaining the distance they require from each other while still parenting effectively. Separated couples do not necessarily maintain a constant degree of conflict throughout the duration of the separation/divorce process.

Some families are engaged in high conflict in the early stages of separation, especially when one partner did not want the separation. Initial anger can be very intense. With time, some parents can move to a lower-conflict relationship with more direct communication. Conversely, some separations begin with little animosity, but conflict may increase when difficult issues, such as the division of assets or new partners, must be tackled. During times of stress and higher conflict, families should revert to parallel-parenting techniques with lower or no direct contact.

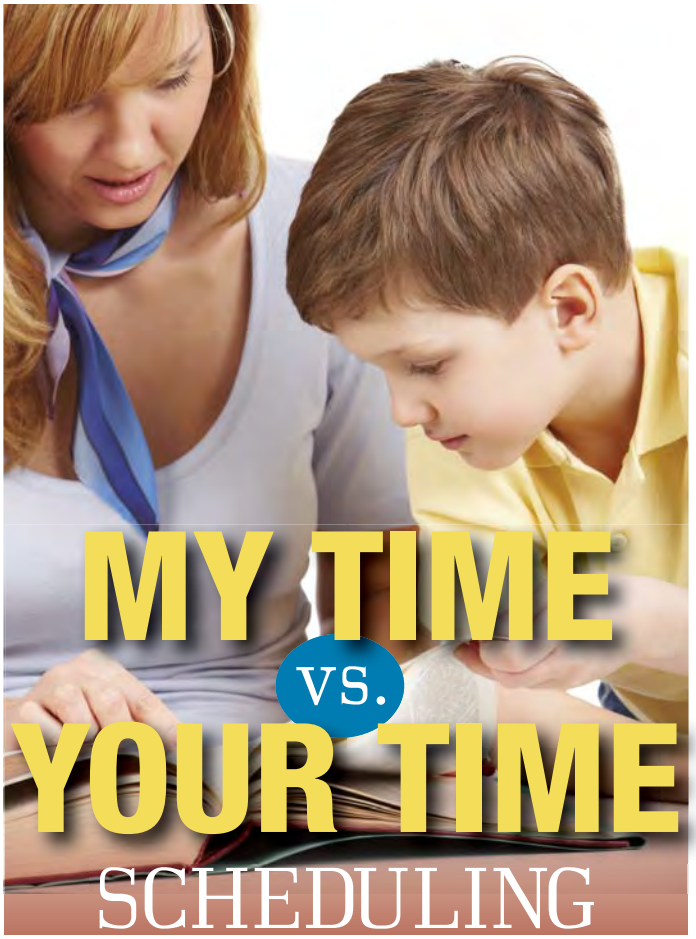
One parent may experience more conflict and anger than the other. Even when only one parent is in high-conflict mode, low- to no-contact techniques are preferable to direct-contact methods until the conflict/anger subsides. When people communicate directly before they are emotionally ready to do so, they will likely experience failure. Conflict may then inadvertently increase. Research indicates that once people have tried and failed to communicate, their ability and willingness to engage in a non-conflictual, direct mode of communication subsequently diminishes. In some cases, the angry treatment given and received completely impairs the parenting partners' ability to see themselves as anything but enemies forever. If you are unable to communicate directly to your ex in a civil fashion, do not let anyone talk you into it. The parent who is able to engage in a more direct mode of communication often tries to make the other parent, who is appropriately trying to distance him/herself, feel guilty.

Parents should not accept such guilt about not yet being able to talk directly to the "friendly parent". In fact, it is likely to be to your children's advantage for you to act cautiously and to engage in a low- to no-contact communication mode when you are unsure that you can manage your own anger.

Because the degree of conflict between separated/divorced parents may vary over time, parents need to develop a range of options for communication, including both direct contact and low- to no-contact strategies within their parenting repertoire. It is useful for parents to re-evaluate the conflict level regularly and to make adjustments in the amount of contact between themselves accordingly.

Whether you engage in co-parenting or parallel parenting, you can still be good parents. Regardless of how close you are to your ex, you can still both be very close to your children. And that's what it's all about. ■

Janice Shaw is a counselor and the coordinator of the separation and divorce programs at Jewish Family and Child Services in Toronto.



MY TIME VS. YOUR TIME SCHEDULING

By Mike Mastracci

You may resist having to keep to a set co-parenting schedule, but it is best to keep your schedule changes to a minimum.

When I first became a separated parent and realized that life would become much different than I imagined, I had a difficult time embracing the fact that I would have to parent by a specific and rigid schedule. The ongoing difficulties associated with having a child in common with someone you have great trouble dealing with can seem overwhelming at times. You may feel like you will be stuck in such a situation for years on end. I have found it really helps if you adhere to a schedule and limit your requests to deviate from that schedule.

I think I can already hear your objections. You may feel the way I did – it shouldn't be this way. Perhaps. But it *is* this way. Trust me when I say that living by the schedule is better than not living by it. I definitely felt that my parenting time shouldn't have had to be only on specific days of the week and certainly not only on every other weekend. What if there was something special and it didn't fall on "my weekend"? I thought that my baby's mother and I should be able to adjust times and events around our schedules. Surely, one would surmise, two reasonable adults can make schedule adjustments concerning their child's life, as needed, at any given time. Wow! Wouldn't that be nice?

The Benefits of Sticking to a Fixed Schedule

I quickly found that many people experience the same frustrations and that they, too, are disappointed when schedule adjustments don't work out. Unfortunately, it's common for newly separated parents to resist a set schedule. In the immediate aftermath of a breakup, especially if emotions are running high, scheduling issues can be a real disaster. In short, my personal and professional experience has demonstrated that the sooner you can get to a fair and reasonable schedule and stick to it, the less you will argue and fight over all child-related issues.

It really is best to limit the opportunities for disagreements. Following a set schedule will help immensely. If there is no agreed-upon child access arrangement or no court-ordered schedule in place, parenting (and life in general) may become significantly more difficult.

Resist the Urge to Change the Schedule

Even when there is a schedule in place, frequent requests to modify the child-access arrangements, especially early on, can lead to problems. So, fight the urge to make lots of scheduling adjustments. Parents will often keep score when it comes to deviating from the schedule; they will base their decision to honor a scheduling adjustment request on the way they have been treated when making similar requests. When that happens, the focus strays from benefiting the children to fixating on "tit for tat" discussions.

If a simple scheduling matter like taking your child to the circus causes problems, then it may not be worth the aggravation to suggest the changes. It is best to stick to the schedule and adjust yourself accordingly. These life adjustments are far better than constant arguing and fighting. Having to miss out on things is just another sacrifice to be made when parents decide not to stay together. If you do decide to request a change or a switch in the schedule, you should give as much notice as possible and state why you're suggesting the change. When you do so, state why the schedule change will benefit the children. It is not about accommodating you. That will generally not be persuasive.

To get out of keeping score, teach by example. If you can be big enough to "give in" to a schedule adjustment

request, don't ask for make-up time. Try to get out of that habit. But, if scheduling accommodations are a virtual "one-way street," it may occasionally be necessary to hold your ground and not give in to make a point. However, keep in mind that one of your noblest child-friendly goals should be to do all that you can to promote a give-and-take parenting relationship. Someone has to get it started. Remember the line from an old hymn, "Let peace begin with me"?

When there is a permanent schedule in place (keeping in mind that when it comes to child custody and visitation, everything is subject to future modification by the courts) and when the schedule is followed, life is significantly easier for everyone. It is often best to conduct yourself by acting as if you will only have your children on the days and times that are spelled out in your court order; without exception. Simply put – you can only schedule activities and do things with your children when those things fall during your "scheduled" time. This is not as bad as it sounds. In fact, it is beneficial in many respects.

To illustrate this point, I will share the basic 50-50 residential schedule (holiday and vacation times excluded for now) that has governed my life, my son's life, and my ex-wife's life for more than a decade. After you grasp the schedule, I will point out some of the advantages and disadvantages of sticking to it.

My Court Order

That the Plaintiff and Defendant shall have shared physical custody of the said minor child in accordance with the following schedule:

- The minor child shall be in the care of the Plaintiff on Mondays and Tuesdays (overnights) and alternating Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays (overnights) with the transition occurring after school (from school) during the school year, and at 6:00 p.m. during the summer and in the event that school is closed.
- The minor child shall be in the care of the Defendant on Wednesdays and Thursdays (overnights) and alternating Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays (over nights) with the transition time occurring after school (from school) during the school year, and at 6:00 p.m. during the summer and in the event that school is closed.

The party exercising parental time with the minor child shall be responsible for returning the child to the other parent at 6:00 p.m. as outlined above. When the transitions occur after school, the receiving party shall be responsible for picking up the minor child from school.

The plain English translation is that the "said minor child" always spends the night with one parent on Mondays and Tuesdays and with the other on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and they alternate Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights. It is a basic five-two and two-five set alternating schedule; the child spends five consecutive overnights with mom, followed by two overnights with dad, then two with mom and then five with dad.

If you have such a schedule, you don't have to spend time figuring out if it is your Monday or your Tuesday or her Wednesday, and so forth. In my case, if something falls on a Monday or Tuesday evening, I instantly know that my son is with me. If it is a Wednesday or Thursday night activity, I know that my son is with his mom.

Such a schedule seems fair. The benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Both parents can plan around it without constantly having to interact with each other over scheduling issues. Both parents will miss out on some things. Sometimes the schedule may benefit you, sometimes it won't. Like life in general, there are many times when things will go in your favor, and many times when they will not. Both you and your children will get over it.

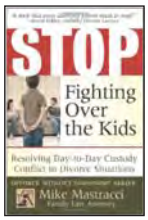
Scheduling Dos

- Focus on what you can do when the children are scheduled to be with you.
- Recognize that the other parent is equally as blessed or cursed at times by adhering to a set schedule.
- Try to be accommodating in changing things for the other parent to build "goodwill" for the future.
- Recognize that if you get into the habit of making scheduling accommodations when asked, it will increase the odds that one day you will receive the same courtesies.
- Teach by doing.
- Lead by example.

Scheduling Don'ts

- Don't make plans with your children, or concerning your children, that do not fall on your scheduled time.
- Don't let your children know about "tentative plans" that they will "miss out on" if the other parent won't adjust the schedule.
- Don't set your children up for disappointment over scheduling change requests.
- Don't dwell on things that you or your children miss because the schedule isn't in your favor.

If you find yourself in never-ending battles over who gets the kids on this day or that day, you need to hope that these scheduling fights will get "old" before the children do. The good news is that by the time your children hit the teenage years difficult parents do often lighten-up with each other. The bad news is that dealing with teenagers presents a whole new type of parent-child scheduling dilemma, so save your energy! ■



This article has been edited and ex-cerpted from the book STOP Fighting Over the Kids *(St. Gabriel's Press, 2009).*

Mike Mastracci is the president of the Maryland Collaborative Law Association. MikeTheLawyer.com

9 Strategies for Effective and Healthy Co-Parenting

Follow these strategies and give your child the peaceful and loving environment he or she deserves.

By Shannon R. Rios

Strategy #1: Choose to Take the High Road

In the co-parenting class I teach, parents say, "I am the one who always buys notebooks for my child." What I say is, if you are not able to civilly communicate about this, then take the high road. If notebooks (or pants, or shoes, or diapers) are worth a huge argument, then you are not willing to put your child's needs first. This anger is truly not about the notebook, the notebook represents your old unresolved issues and anger at this person. "Let the old anger go." Let the stuff go, it is not worth it.

Strategy #2: Pick Your Battles

A previous manager of mine said to me, "Shannon, I have learned to pick my battles." She was indicating there are things she chose to ignore because it would be a huge uphill climb.

Make sure that the issues you choose to bring to your ex's attention are really worth the amount of effort you may extend in arguing about them. Always assess the cost-benefit ratio of your actions. Make sure the cost of bringing the issue up will reap a big enough benefit.

Strategy #3: Don't Act In Anger

Give yourself some time to calm down so you can think clearly. Don't speak to your co-parent when you are angry. Ask yourself why this situation is so frustrating for you. What are you telling yourself about this situation that makes it so frustrating? Take your own time-out if you are feeling angry. Do something healthy to help yourself calm down. The good news is that you always have a say in the choices you make.

Strategy #4: Don't Battle it Out in the Courts — Use Other Methods Whenever Possible

A therapist whom I used to teach a "Co-Parenting Through Your Divorce" class with would tell parents that we only had one thing to say about battling it out in the courts. He told participants in the class, "You will end up frustrated and broke." If you choose to battle in the courts and you have children, you can be assured of one outcome: your children will lose. I have also heard many parents agree that you lose complete control once you have given the courts responsibility for the decisions you cannot make for your family. And there are many other options, such as mediation, collaborative team divorce, and parent coordination, which are much less adversarial. Please explore these options for the sake of your children.

If you are considering taking your divorce into the courts or if you already are in court, please take a moment now and assess why you truly are doing this. Do you think this is going to be better for your family in the long run? Or are you harboring old anger that you are hoping the courts will work out for you? Is this really about your child or deep down is it your issue with the other parent you are trying to have the courts work out. The legal process is very expensive. Don't waste your child's future education arguing your old wounds in court. This is not the way to peace.

You may be wondering at this point what a parenting coordinator does. Most states have a professional role of this type, and they may be called different names in each state. In this role, I use all my skills and training to assist parents to effectively work together for the greatest good of their child. A parenting coordinator by definition in the state of Colorado is:

"A person with specific qualifications that can be appointed by the court or by agreement of the parties to resolve parenting disputes after your case has been concluded. You can agree to make the recommendations of a third person binding by jointly requesting the appointment of a decision maker whose decisions can be enforced by a court order." – CRS § 14-10-128.1

The parent coordinator, if used effectively, can facilitate choices and change to promote long-term healing and healthy co-parenting for your family. There is no price you can put on the impact of this for you and your children. It is definitely a choice you should explore. It can save you money by keeping you out of the courts. When I am working as a parenting coordinator, I also view my role as getting the two parents to work together on their own. Other alternatives to going to court include collaborative team divorce and mediation. If you can use any of these, I would recommend it for the long-term health of your family.

Strategy #5: Follow the Business-Meeting Guidelines Model

If you and your co-parent are able to meet or talk on the phone, use the following business-meeting guidelines for your conversations:

- No yelling.
- No saying bad words.
- One person talks at a time.
- Take a break if needed – either parent can call a timeout.
- No bringing up the past.
- No blaming.
- If you're not getting anywhere, ask for the meeting to end.
- Create any other guidelines you think would be helpful and agree to them prior to the meeting.

Sample meeting outline:

- Have an agenda of items you both want to discuss. You can both share your items when you meet.
- Have a picture of your child in front of you as you discuss. Remember this is about them, not you and your issues, anger or fears.
- Focus on the present.
- Envision this person as a co-worker with whom you must get along.
- See this meeting as you would any other business meeting.
- Use the words please and thank you as much as possible.
- Remember to use "I statements" and not blame the other person. Take responsibility.
- If the meeting gets heated and you are feeling your frustration or anger rise over a level 3 or 4, call a timeout, use the restroom or take a break.
- If it seems that you are not accomplishing anything and the frustration or anger level rises to a 5, adjourn the meeting and reschedule.

Strategy #6: Use the Problem-Solving Method when Co-Parenting Issues Arise

This six-step method is good for parents who have some ability to communicate. If you are not communicating, use this model with a neutral third party present:

- Make an appointment – the person with the concern should make the appointment.
- Describe the problem – making "I statements" so as to not blame the other person. State how you think the problem is making your child's life or your life challenging. Example: I am feeling frustrated with pick up times because Suzy was upset yesterday when you were late. What can we do to ensure we are both on time?
- The other parent responds – not with excuses but with reasons for this situation. Example: "I apologize for being late. I have a big project at work and it is close to the deadline right now."
- The person with the problem suggests a solution to problem. Example: "Can you tell them you need to leave early on Fridays or should we change the pick-up time for the next few weeks?"
- Discussion – the other parent either agrees or disagrees with solution posed. If you can't come to an agreement, table it for the day. If you begin to argue, take a break or decide to discuss at another time (set the time).
- Review – go over the solution that was decided on or what will happen next (eg. will discuss again in two days after considering options).

Strategy #7: Follow General Communication Guidelines

- If you are not able to communicate verbally without conflict, use email and text as a means to communicate. This is actually much better for your child than anger and unhealthy boundaries. However, it is important to not act out in front of your child if you receive a text message that frustrates you.
- Keep a journal of what happens during your time with your child and share the journal with your co-parent as a method of communication instead of talking at exchanges.
- Share a common scheduler when possible. There are many online calendars and communication systems for families of divorce. Family Wizard is one of them.
- Use "I statements" instead of "You statements", sometimes called U-bombs, because "You statements" have a very negative effect on communication.

Strategy #8: Follow the Rules of Engagement for Creating Healthy/Functional Boundaries

- When visiting the other parent's home, especially relating to the pick-up and drop-off of children, be respectful. This process needs to be very clear.
- Determine what type of access each parent has to the other parent's home at pick-up and drop-off times. Get these expectations clear for both of you.

- You must transition your intimate relationship and all of its woes and closeness aspects to a complete business relationship.
- You understand that there must be boundaries in this new business relationship. This is not a place for extreme emotion, this is a workplace, the place where you will grow and develop your child. If conflict is still occurring, contact should be minimal. If there is a lot of negative emotion, contact should be limited to text messages and emails unless there is an emergency.
- Parenting is now your job as a divorced parent. You cannot rely on your child's other parent for everyday shared parenting. They may not be available and you must learn to parent your child on your own now. If this is difficult for you, I recommend taking a class. There are many resources on and offline. Try www.loveandlogic.com to find a good parenting class. You can also find helpful resources at www.theparentstoolshop.com. Don't allow your child to suffer because you don't have good parenting skills.
- You are not friends with your ex unless this is possible for the two of you. You don't need to discuss intimate and personal details, you are now divorced. This only continues the relationship for one or both parents, making it harder for you and your child to move on. Usually one person may still want intimacy whether they know it or not; if this is the case, being friends is not possible. Being friends with the underlying need of intimacy will always lead to some type of upset.
- Communication must be very clear and email may be the best method to ensure everyone is on the same page regarding your child and logistics. Communication should be limited to those things that are necessary to discuss about your child. When you have your child, unless there is an emergency, there really should be no reason to contact your co-parent.
- If possible, decide on a time once a month or once every other week where you will discuss any important issues regarding the child either on the phone or in a public place. Know what you will discuss in this meeting and stick to the topic. Stay in the present and know that compromise is the key. If you can't agree on something, table it for a few days. If you still can't agree, use a mediator or parenting coordinator.
- Remember, when it comes to your child and their parents agreeing, there never is a winner or loser. As long as parents can agree, your child will win.

The Wisconsin Inter-Professional Committee on Divorce's Structured Co-Parenting Training summarizes the conditions necessary for successful co-parenting:

- Successful co-parents love their children. This means that as a parent you put aside your personal needs and interests to do what is right for your child now so they will have an easier life as an adult.
- Successful co-parents separate problems of the spousal relationship from the responsibilities and tasks of parenting. They keep their feelings and issues about how the marriage ended in a box away from the co-parent relationship.
- Successful co-parents are honest with each other regarding children's issues and do not engage in discussing non-child-related information – it is now none of your business.
- Successful co-parents keep their promises to each other and their child. They know breaking agreements leads to chaos.

1. Successful co-parents set and work toward goals for their children.
2. Set goals for your children – what environment or life do you want to create for your child of divorce?
3. Make plans on how to accomplish those goals – parenting plans and parents agreeing on behavior with each other.
4. Carry out the plans.

Strategy #9: Follow the Co-Parenting Job Description

I created this job description for the role of co-parent, as it is truly one of the most important jobs you will ever have in life.

It is very important that you and your co-parent understand the requirements. You may not have had a job description when you started as a parent, but now as you take on this new role of a co-parent, I wanted you to be clear that the expectations is the most important role within the new family organization. It is instrumental in ensuring that the emotional and physical development of the child is maintained appropriately. This positive role serves the child to ensure they adjust in the best way possible to an event that was not their choice. It is essential that this role finds ways to communicate effectively with the other co-parent. This role understands the importance of both parents being involved in their child's life.

If you implement the above strategies you will no longer be a parent basher. You will be an effective and healthy co-parent for your child. ■

This article has been edited and excerpted from the book The 7 Fatal Mistakes Divorced & Separated Parents Make: Strategies for Raising Healthy Children of Divorce *(Lifethreads Books, 2009). Shannon Rios, MS LMFT, is a marriage and family therapist who specializes in working with children and families of divorce and conflict.* www.healthychildrenofdivorce.com.

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Talking To Your Child:

Positive Comments About Her Other Parent

Your child is listening. It is important that she hears you talk nicely about her other parent.

By Ellen Kellner

Face it. The subject of your child's other parent is going to come up between you and your child. When it is your child who is doing the talking, remember she is also listening. She is hearing what you say about her other parent and she is internalizing all of those words. So what form will your words take? Will you talk about her dad through clenched teeth or through a smile? You get to choose what your child hears from you. Choose the Pro-Child Way.

The Old Way

You rarely mention your ex's name. There is an understanding that your ex was a part of your past and a bad part, at that. If in a moment of weakness, his name is mentioned, it certainly isn't in a positive light. You hiss his name through clenched teeth and follow it by a string of expletives. The comments that you make about your ex are anything but positive. Everyone in the household knows that it is better to avoid the topic altogether, and they do.

Your child knows, through experience, that mentioning her dad's name brings a wrath of sarcasm and old pain to your surface. She knows that in your home, her dad's name is not welcome. And you are just fine with that.

It's so important that your child hear you talk nicely about her other parent.

The Pro-Child Way

Sure your ex might have been difficult, but there has to be something nice you can say about him. He has nice hair? He has good hearing? He can walk in a straight line? If not, make it up. It is so important that your child hear you talk nicely about her other parent. This is her dad, a person that she loves. You shouldn't "dis" the people that your child loves. And you shouldn't badmouth the people that love your child, especially her dad.

Your child should always hear positive comments about her dad, even if it is as simple as "your dad always brushes his teeth with such care." She doesn't need to know that this annoying habit usually lasted about 20 minutes of every day and night, and gave him the excuse to not change her diaper. What bothered you about your ex could be a welcome trait in your child. Wouldn't it be wonderful if your child suddenly developed an interest in brushing her teeth after hearing this?

So, think of nice things to say. Daily, mention your ex in positive ways. Any way of bringing positive thoughts of your child's dad to her is beneficial to her. You don't want your ex to be some abstract, foreign person. You want him to be real, tangible, and ever present in her life and thoughts. "You'll have to tell Dad that joke, he'll love it." "Look at that car, it looks just like Dad's car." "Dad's at work right now, I bet he's eating lunch too." "Your giggle is so nice, it's just like Dad's." "Yum, look at that lobster. Dad loves lobster, too." "You chose to make the flowers blue. Blue is Dad's favorite color." Mention, mention, mention. And by the way, just as you're not to insinuate that your ex is actually a deadbeat jerk, you're also not to insinuate a longing or unrequited love for him. Keep your emotions out of it. This isn't about you. This is about making room for Dad in your child's life. This is about including him in her home.

Inevitably, your child will ask you if you love Daddy. If your child ever asks, the answer should be an immediate "Yes, of course! He's your dad. I love everyone that cares for you." Your child has never experienced romantic love and would have no clue what that is. It really isn't necessary to explain the difference. Your child isn't interested in the degree of love, just that you love the person that she loves too. You can say this.

Keep the positive comments flowing. Through your consistent remarks, your child will learn to be secure in also bringing up her dad's name. You want to encourage your child to share her feelings about her dad without fear of being attacked or judged. In turn, your child will feel that her dad's presence is an integral part of her life. And you should be just fine with that. ■

Ellen Kellner is an expert with The National Association of Divorce for Women and Children, and a contributor to Cutting Edge Law. *Ellen inspires other divorced parents and law professionals to nurture the child's spirit through divorce. With her book,* The Pro-Child Way: Parenting with an Ex *(Untapped Talent, 2010). Ellen shares her Pro-Child tactics with parents who are looking for a conscientious method to divorced parenting. For more information visit* www.theprochildway.com.

GETTING A PARENTAL GRIP

By Amy Botwinick

Many parents put themselves under a lot of pressure when they think about the talk they need to have with their children about the upcoming separation.

The biggest challenge is to be your children's rock during a time when you feel like you are about to lose your mind. During the transition, your kids are dealing with their own issues and emotions. There is definitely pain and loss for children; they will need time to grieve and experience their pain before moving on. As their parent, you need to give your children time and space to do this, which will require much of your patience and energy. You have to be in a good place yourself to do this and find the strength to help them get through this difficult time.

It can be a recipe for disaster as they test you and watch to see how you are going to stand up to them and the new reality you all face. What they need from you right now is for you to be a strong parent. Don't use your children as your emotional support – they are not miniature adults. The last thing you want to do is switch roles where they feel this incredible burden of making sure you are all right.

It scares them, and it's just not their job. It's an easy trap to fall into so remember to let them be children and keep them out of the adult world of problems. Find the appropriate support system through friends, family and organizations to help get you through this time. Do what you need to get yourself in a good place so you can regain your strength. You can't give to your children what you don't have yourself.

It will be very important for your children to express their feelings. Sharing your own feelings (with much editing) will encourage them to share as well. Don't be afraid to be honest and let them hear that you are sad about the family breaking up. Follow up with some positive thoughts and ideas of how the situation will get better. Some children will require counselling to help them through the adjustment period. It's important that they express their feelings and deal with their emotions; otherwise, it just comes back to haunt them and you. For those of you with an only child, keep in mind that they have no sibling to commiserate with. Group counselling with children in similar circumstances can be very helpful so they know they are not alone.

The Right Words, the Right Time, the Right Place

Many parents put themselves under a lot of pressure when they think about the talk they need to have with their children about the upcoming separation. They get freaked out that if they say the wrong words, their children will be set on the path to impending doom and misery. It simply requires some common sense and plenty of love.

The most important thing you can do is to break the news with your spouse as a family without assigning blame. Come from the heart with honesty and assure them that their relationship with both parents will continue (if possible). Pick an appropriate time and place they feel safe so there will be plenty of time to answer their questions. Ask them about their fears and concerns and address them the best you can with the constant reassurance you will always love them and that the divorce was not their fault. Don't fall into the trap of giving them false hope you might get back together again just to make them feel better.

Divorce is confusing for children, so don't overload them with too much information. Give them basic information so they understand you will continue to take care of them and love them the same way. Remember, "The Talk" will never go exactly how you planned, and your children's reactions will be painful to see. Allow plenty of time for hugs and kisses and explain again that it was an adult decision that had nothing to do with them.

Information you give your children should always be age appropriate. As the years pass and they grow up, they might ask for more specific details of your breakup. This can be difficult, but you want to remain honest as you try not to bad-mouth their other parent. Kids are very smart. Give them the basics without focusing on the negative, and they will fill in the holes for themselves. Always keep the lines of communication open. Leaving children in the dark can be harmful because their imaginations will likely make up realities that are much worse than what really happened. This can leave children angry and confused which can affect their future relationships and how they see their world.

Books are a great tool to use when talking about divorce. Always read each book from beginning to end to make sure you are comfortable with the information.

Here are some suggestions:

- Three to seven years old: *It's Not Your Fault*, KoKo Bear By Vicky Lansky, Book Peddlers
- School-age children: *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* By Laurene Drasney Brown and Marc Brown, Brown and Company
- Older school-age children: *How Do I Feel About: My Parents' Divorce* By Julia Cole, Copper Beech Books
- Preteen: *Pre-Teen Pressures: Divorce* By Debra Goldentyer, Steck Vaughn

There is a great catalogue called *Child's Work, Child's Play* that provides great tools such as books and board games to help your children adapt to the change. Showing them that there are other children in similar situations will keep them from feeling alienated.

It's important to paint a picture for children of how their immediate future will look. Explain their new living arrangements, how much time they will be spending with each parent, and what holidays and vacations will look like. Let them have access to your soon-to-be-ex's extended family. The more people in a child's life who support and love them, the better off they will be. Don't ever ask a child to choose who they want to live with; it's not fair to put them in that position. Prepare them with books and games before the actual separation and try to spend some extra time together. Continue to do the family rituals; make having fun a priority with your kids. Do the best you can to prepare your children for the upcoming changes and don't forget to check yourself – separating for the first child visitation will be very difficult on all of you.

For more suggestions on helping yourself and your kids, visit certified divorce coach Amy Botwinick, author of Congratulations on Your Divorce *(HCI, 2005):* www.divorcecoachsupport.com

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Relocation & Co-Parenting

The challenge of co-parenting over long distances.

By Dr. Edward Kruk

The question of relocation after parental divorce is difficult and complex. However, parenting plans that both accommodate parental relocation, and maintain the same proportion of responsibility exercised by each parent before and after relocation, while extremely challenging, are possible.

Equal or shared parenting can be made to work when parents live some distance apart, particularly with older children. At the same time, in the interests of stability and continuity in children's lives, relocation should be undertaken only after careful consideration in regard to the impact such a move will have on children, and on their relationships with both parents. It is no surprise that research indicates that children of divorce fare better if their parents remain in the same local area.

Possible Consequences of Relocation on Children

Sanford Braver, Ira Ellman, and William Fabricius studied 500 college students who grew up with divorced parents (see "Relocation of Children After Divorce and Children's Best Interests: New Evidence and Legal Considerations", published in *the Journal of Family Psychology,* Vol. 17[2], June 2003). The students were divided into two groups based on the moving history of their families: In the first, neither parent moved more than one hour away from the original family home; while in the second, one parent did move more than one hour away. Children's psychological and emotional adjustment, health status, and other factors were measured. Results showed those whose parents had been separated by more than an hour's drive were "significantly disadvantaged," scoring poorly on numerous measures, including hostility, distress over their parents' divorce, and generally poor physical health and life satisfaction.

In their article "Developmental Issues in Relocation Cases Involving Young Children: When, Whether, and How?" (*Journal of Family Psychology, Vol.* 17[2], June 2003), Joan Kelly and Michael Lamb conclude that relocation stresses and often disrupts psychologically important parent-child relationships, and this in turn has adverse consequences for children. Younger children are particularly vulnerable to disruptions in attachment formation and consolidation, and are therefore likely to suffer the most when relocation occurs, with long-term consequences.

Moving is ubiquitous in North American society. Statistics indicate that 16% of all Americans move during a year's time, with 43% of them outside of their current metropolitan area. Moving is most common among people ages 20 to 34, the age group most likely to have young children. Thus, kids are even more likely to move than adults. Moving with children is particularly common after divorce.

Useful Guidelines

Kelly and Lamb provide some useful guidelines for maintaining children's relationships with both parents if relocation is to occur:

- Divorced parents wishing to relocate should consider waiting until their children are at least two or (even better) three years old, because the children are then better equipped with the cognitive and language skills necessary to maintain long-distance relationships.
- As children grow older, their changing developmental needs must remain at the forefront of whatever arrangements parents make to modify their schedules and to accommodate co-parenting of their children over long distances.
- Parenting plans should also make explicit reference to the regular use of telephone calls, videotapes, email, and web cameras, in which communication can take place during periods that children are separated from either of their parents – although a disembodied voice over the phone, or an image on the screen is never a substitute for actual physical contact.
- Co-parenting over long distances requires a good deal of creativity and flexibility, and parents in these circumstances may particularly benefit from support services such as mediation, parenting coordination, and the development of parenting plans.

What the Courts Say

Courts have generally upheld the ability of custodial parents to relocate, based on the assumption that "what is good for the custodial parent is good for the child." The "distress argument" is often made that to deny a parent's application to relocate will cause such psychological harm to the parent that it will damage her or his ability to provide care. Such a position overlooks the fact the relocation will cause the non-resident parent even greater distress, and importantly, threatens the child's relationship with the non-relocating parent and thereby the child's well-being.

Court decisions are beginning to change, however, as studies demonstrate that children's relationships with both parents are best safeguarded by legislation that discourages child relocation when both parents are actively involved in parenting after divorce. New legislation in Wisconsin, for example, requires a moving parent to prove that prohibiting the move would be harmful to children's best interests. In contested cases a rebuttable presumption that children remain in the community in which they have become adjusted would safeguard children's existing relationships and should be part of equal or shared parenting legislation.

Prioritizing a Child's Needs

Above all else, children's best interests should be the main concern in any discussion about relocation. Primary among these is the preservation of children's primary attachments to both parents, and bearing in mind that children have a different concept of distance to adults; what may seem manageable to the parents may be experienced as an infinite distance away by children. To the degree that children's meaningful relationships with both parents can be accommodated after relocation – a key factor in their post-divorce adjustment and well-being – the decision to relocate is made easier.

The likely effects of moving on the children's social relationships must also be considered. To the extent that relocation threatens children's relationships with a parent, and their existing social network, the potential adverse effects of relocation should be at the forefront of decision-making about the residential arrangements of children after divorce. The choice to have children necessarily involves sacrifices, and one of those sacrifices may come down to having to prioritize a child's needs to maintain a fulfilling relationship with both parents, over an often selfish desire to start afresh following divorce. ■

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HOW CO-PARENTS CREATE LOYALTY CONFLICTS

Although there might be bumps along the road, most parents are able to put their children first and become successful co-parents post-divorce. Sometimes, however, one spouse can't let go of the bitterness and anger caused by the failed marriage; consciously or unconsciously, the angry ex attempts to turn the children against the other parent. Here's how to recognize and protect your child from these kinds of loyalty conflicts.

By Dr. Amy Baker and Paul Fine

If you're co-parenting with an ex who engages in behaviors that induce loyalty conflicts, your child might become alienated and exhibit the eight behaviors described in this article. It's important for you to develop a sense of the ways in which your ex may be turning your child against you, and the signs that your child is being affected.

Signs that Your Child is Caught up in a Loyalty Conflict

Some children who are exposed to behaviors that may induce loyalty conflict can maintain a relationship with both parents. Unfortunately, not all children are resistant to parental pressure. Some get caught up in the loyalty conflict and align themselves with one parent, but this doesn't happen overnight. If you keep an eye out for these signs and behaviors, you can intervene while your child is only mildly alienated, rather than refusing to interact with you.

1. A Campaign of Denigration:

An early sign that your child has been affected by a loyalty conflict is that he becomes unreasonably negative toward you. He behaves as if he's entitled to inform you of your shortcomings, and he does so in a harsh manner. Your child will make statements that criticize you, rather than the things you do, and may deny any past positive experiences with you.

A campaign of denigration also includes your child's willingness to broadcast his troubles with you. This unusual behavior runs counter to most children's desire to keep family problems private and can be damaging to your child's character formation. Rather than being taught how to work through problems and accept imperfections, she's being taught that people are expendable.

2. Weak, Frivolous, or Absurd Reasons for Rejecting You:

If your child is on a campaign of denigration, the rationale she gives for her anger may be out of proportion to the level of animosity she displays. Your ex may have encouraged your child to pounce on your errors, and it's as if your child was waiting for something to happen so that she could respond with full-scale rejection.

Some children will allege abuse as their reason for not wanting to spend time with the other parent. Obviously, an abuse claim is not in and of itself a weak, frivolous, or absurd reason for rejection. However, in some cases, a claim is proven to be false, but the child continues to cite abuse as a reason for the animosity. Regardless, child protection services may prohibit contact between the child and the alleged perpetrator while the abuse claim is investigated, allowing the other parent unfettered access to the child.

3. Hero Worship vs. Baseless Contempt:

Your child can simultaneously hold mixed feelings about her parents. However, if your child is involved in a loyalty conflict, she may have selectively lost this ability. All parents have potentially frustrating qualities, and even the most accommodating parents must set limits that cause resentment. If your child is involved in a loyalty conflict, however, she may demonstrate an idealized support for one parent. Such hero worship, combined with baseless contempt for the other parent, is unhealthy and unrealistic.

Lack of ambivalence represents a distortion of reality that could eventually interfere with your child's ability to function in the real world. A child who assumes that anyone less than perfect should be rejected will grow up to have few friends and difficulty maintaining relationships.

4. The "Independent Thinker" Phenomenon:

The hallmark of this phenomenon is not simply denial of the other parent's influence when asked, but anticipation that someone might assume such an influence, spurring strenuous efforts to protect the favored parent from blame. Your child's defense of your ex will be followed by rehearsed complaints that justify his rejection of you.

If your child is unduly influenced by your ex, his ability to think for himself is being compromised. All decisions are filtered through the needs and desires of his other parent. Your child is actually unnecessarily dependent on your ex, to the detriment of his ability to experience his own thoughts and feelings.

5. Absence of Guilt for Rejecting You:

Your child may behave coldly towards you, with no qualms about treating you in this manner. Gratitude may be noticeably absent. Your authority as a parent has been denied and erased, and your child has been encouraged to act as if your feelings don't exist. However, such behavior is a sign of a loyalty conflict only when it occurs in response to or in conjunction with exposure to behaviors that may induce a loyalty conflict, and in the absence of a legitimate reason.

Absence of concern for other people is likely to interfere with your child's healthy development. A child who does not experience empathy will be unlikely to sustain meaningful, healthy relationships.

6. Reflexive Support for Your Ex in Parental Conflicts:

It's doubtful that a court-ordered parenting plan can cover every eventuality; there are always some gray areas. Toxic co-parents seem to possess a particular genius for focusing on those areas and making a case for why they should have the children during those times. No matter what the disagreement is about, children who are caught up in a loyalty conflict will side with their favored parent. The child "knows" that the favored parent is always right, and nothing the

accused parent could show him would correct that misperception.

7. Borrowed Scenarios:

If your child is caught up in a loyalty conflict, she may start to make accusations about you that use phrases borrowed from your ex. Your child's words and tone of voice may appear strikingly reminiscent of your ex. Your child may make accusations that she can't support, use words that she can't define, or recall events (or versions of events) that never happened and that put you in a bad light.

8. Extension of Animosity to Your Friends and Family:

If your child is experiencing a loyalty conflict, she may begin to resist spending time with you as well as your friends and family. Formerly beloved grandparents, aunts, and uncles may suddenly be avoided. Your child may deny ever having been close or having fun with them and may also denigrate them with cruel nicknames or comments.

Common Mistakes when Co-parenting with an Antagonistic Ex

1. Giving in to Anger:

It's understandable that parents whose efforts to communicate with their children are blocked would become frustrated. Of course, the solution is not to take your anger out on your child. While your child may act rude, disrespectful, and hurtful, they are inwardly being torn apart. Responding with anger only reinforces the negative messages your child is hearing about you and increases the likelihood that your child will side with your ex.

2. Giving in to Depression and Defeat:

If you allow yourself to feel defeated and demoralized when your ex attempts to paint you in a negative light, you risk feeling sad and depressed even when spending time with your child. Afterwards, you may experience feelings of despair and regret. Some co-parents allow negative perceptions expressed by their ex or their child to become self-fulfilling prophecies and unwittingly increase their child's disappointment.

3. Focusing on the Wrong Thing:

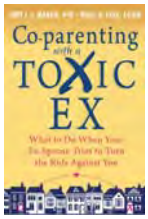
When faced with an accusatory child, some parents rush to prove that the child is incorrect. It's understandable to want to convince an emotional child that he has nothing to be upset about. But providing proof of your innocence is usually not sufficient, and refusal to accept the proof means that your child isn't really upset about the facts. Children in this situation typically respond to the way the parent behaves, not the facts being presented. The alternative to frantically explaining your innocence is to address the feeling and the reason behind the accusation.

4. Blaming the Ex/Failure to Look at Oneself:

Having learned about all the behaviors that may induce a loyalty conflict, you may incorrectly assume that every complaint is part of a master-plan to erase you from your child's lfe. This is counterproductive with respect to your relationship with your child: it means that you may ignore realistic and constructive criticism, and your child will perceive you to care more about being right than about being an open and truly dedicated parent. It may seem challenging to treat each criticism with an open mind – even when it comes from a child who has been unfair to you or from an ex – but you need to avoid closing yourself to self-improvement for the sake of your child.

Protect Your Child from Loyalty Conflicts

Unfortunately, general co-parenting advice will be insufficient if your ex is undermining you and interfering in your relationship with your child. Your primary concern must be how to respond to your ex's manipulation of your child in a way that doesn't further entrench your child's alignment with your ex. It's important for you to protect your child from the effects of a loyalty conflict and allow him to love and be loved by both parents. ■



This article has been adapted from Co-parenting with a Toxic Ex (New Harbinger Publications, 2014), *by Amy J. L. Baker and Paul R. Fine*
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