

CO-PARENTING DIVORCE GUIDE



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A portrait of Stuart Skok, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark blazer over a green top, standing in a library with bookshelves in the background.

Stuart Skok

Matrimonial and Family Law lawyer for over 25 years
Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Colorado

"Do something that matters to you and to the world, every day." These are words to live by for Stuart Skok.

Inspired to enter the legal profession by her late grandfather, Judge H. Gus Muntzing, and late father, L. Manning Muntzing, a renowned international nuclear lawyer in Washington D.C., Stuart has been a matrimonial and family law lawyer since graduating law school. Owner and principle of STUART SKOK LAW LLC, in Rockville, Maryland, Stuart is also affiliated with COX BAKER & PAGE, LLC, a family law firm in Castle Rock, Colorado, serving Douglas and surrounding counties around Denver.

Stuart is dedicated to putting families first in her practice, which is devoted to separation, divorce, custody, and other family law matters, in and out of court, at the lower court level, and on appeal. She is certified in Collaborative Law, where parties agree to resolve their family law disputes out of court in a private team-approached process, as well as Divorce Mediation, where she is appointed by the Court or hired by parties to mediate their family law disputes. "I always work with the best interests of the family in mind – particularly the children," she says.

As part of that work, Stuart is routinely appointed by the Maryland Court to act as a *Best Interest Attorney*, where she represents the best interests of the minor children in divorce cases. She has particular experience in family law cases involving children with special needs, having a special needs child herself and was highlighted by SuperLawyers magazine for her work in this arena.

"I believe that when it comes to the health of the family, 'winning' isn't always the best outcome," says Stuart. "In my own case, there was the welfare of my eight-year-old son with Down syndrome and my 11-year-old

daughter to consider. Throughout this experience, I really came to understand the power of compromise."

Stuart shares some of her gained knowledge in a book she authored, *Handbook on Separation and Divorce in Maryland*, now in its fourth edition, to provide her clients, and others facing divorce, with answers to some basic family law questions. She also lectures on family law topics for Continuing Legal Education of other lawyers, as well as programs for the public.

For over 10 years, Stuart has been named by *SuperLawyers* as a Top Family Law Attorney in Maryland and D.C., including the Top 25 *SuperLawyers* in Maryland and Top 50 *SuperLawyers* in D.C. She has been recognized for her work by multiple news publications, profiled as "Attorney of the Month" by *Attorney at Law Magazine*, and *Best Lawyers* Awarded her "Lawyer of the Year" in Family Law: Collaborative in Washington D.C., and named STUART SKOK LAW LLC among the "Best Law Firms" in Family Law.

On the rating system that applies to all lawyers, Stuart and STUART SKOK LAW LLC has also been awarded the highest rating of A-V Preeminent by *Martindale-Hubbell*. In addition, Stuart has repeated earned the "Gold Client Champion Award" from *Martindale-Hubbell*, based on client on-line reviews. She is actively involved in the Maryland and Colorado Bar Associations, and community outreach regarding Down Syndrome to increase awareness and enhance services for children with special needs.

But Stuart, life is not just about activities, awards, and recognition.

"It really does come back to doing something that matters to me – and the world – every single day," she concludes.



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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, vocational and more.

This special Co-Parenting Divorce Guide contains hand-picked articles, book excerpts, advice and more to help you become a successful co-parent to your children post-divorce.



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How to Create a Successful Parenting Plan

A comprehensive and detailed parenting plan helps parents avoid future battles so that parenting disagreements don't escalate into open warfare. While they can't anticipate *every* possible conflict, a good parenting plan *can* identify likely issues and provide a roadmap for handling them.

By Dr. Ann Buscho, Licensed Clinical Psychologist

In my work with divorcing clients over the past 25 years, I've learned many things I wish I'd known myself when I got divorced in the early 1990s. For instance, I wish I'd known that being a single mom was more complicated than it looks. I also wish I'd known how to create a successful parenting plan and co-parenting relationship with my ex.

In my work since then, I have focused on helping parents establish safe and healthy co-parenting relationships. Parents can anticipate issues that will predictably arise and have a documented plan as to how to deal with them. The best way to do this is to create a written co-parenting plan

with explicit agreements that both parents support.

Often these plans are attached to and filed with the final divorce papers.

Why You Need a Parenting Plan

Traditionally, the parenting plan has been about child custody and the legal authority to make decisions on behalf of the children. This bare-bones plan does little to support a healthy co-parenting relationship during the initial period of separation and post-divorce.

Research has shown us that the single most harmful

aspect of a divorce for children is parents in conflict. Conflict and fighting hurts kids when it continues after the divorce is over. Many adult children of divorce will confirm this. Even when parents feel that they shield the children from conflict, children will absorb the parents' stress. A child once told me that he could tell when his mom and dad had been arguing by how his mom hugged him. Children have sensitive conflict radar detectors and are keen observers.

Given the research, I have found that a more comprehensive and detailed parenting plan can help parents avoid future battles. With such a plan, co-parenting disagreements or skirmishes will not escalate into conflicts. Like a peace treaty, a good parenting plan cannot anticipate *every* possible conflict – but it *can* identify likely issues and provide a roadmap for handling issues that are not easily resolved. Working together, the parents create the plan, frequently with the help of a divorce or parenting coach to work out all the details. The plan is unique to each family and anticipates many of the issues that will predictably arise; it can be revised as the family lives with the plan and the children grow older.

Creating a Successful Parenting Plan

Sometimes parents turn to a therapist to facilitate this conversation. The therapist can share child development and divorce research as well as his or her clinical experience. This information helps parents consider their decisions. Over time, parents may revisit the parenting plan if family circumstances change. If the parents are communicating well, there are tools online to help them create their own plan.

A former client, Stephanie, called me recently. She let me know how glad she was that she and her ex had made an agreement about how and when their children would be informed of any new relationships. Four years ago, when she and her ex were developing the plan, I coached them to discuss this issue. The topic brought up painful emotions for both of them and they were reluctant to talk about it. They agreed that if a parent was in a committed, long-term relationship, that parent would inform the other parent before telling the children. They also agreed that it was the right of the parent in the new relationship to tell the children.

Stephanie said to me, "I am so glad that we agreed to this even though I didn't get the point of it when we divorced. If my kids had come home to tell me their father was getting married before he had let me know, I would have been so upset. My kids would have had to see my shock or anger. Because he had already told me, I'd had time to digest the information. I was more able to help my kids process the news." Dealing with new relationships is just one of a number of topics that are included in a good parenting plan.

If both parents fully participate in crafting a written agreement, the plan will help to stabilize the children and family post-divorce.

What is Included in the Plan

A parenting plan includes a detailed schedule: it spells out which parent is "on duty" and which is "off duty" on a particular day. The plan is tailored to each family's needs. Taking into account their work schedules, the parents develop a basic time-sharing calendar. I encourage parents to talk about exceptions, such as holidays, birthdays, summer planning, travel with or without the children, and family traditions. The parents decide who holds the passports, who is the liaison with doctors, the schools, etc.

Parents often want to include agreements about screen time, school activities, and religious education. They discuss extracurricular activities, medical decisions, decisions about driving, sleepovers, parties, and more. Parents often discuss and make agreements about communication with the children when off duty. They discuss discipline, rules at each home, and the children's chores. We craft agreements around parents' use of alcohol or drugs, particularly when the children are present. We discuss extended family relationships and how the parents will support those relationships.

Most importantly, parents make agreements about their communication, and how and what information is shared. They make agreements about boundaries and privacy. Many other topics may be included, depending on the needs of the family.

What if a Problem Comes up Later?

Parents should agree on what they will do when they cannot resolve a future disagreement. For example, they may agree that either of them can request the assistance of a neutral therapist or mediator. The other parent agrees to attend, and the parent initiating the assistance pays for the first meeting.

Parents who nest (or "birds-nest") during the transition to divorce will also be much more successful with a nesting parenting plan. A nesting plan will likely include many of the above topics, as well as unique topics such as finances and care of the home.

If both parents fully participate in crafting a written agreement, the plan will help to stabilize the children and family post-divorce. The parenting plan is one of the essential tools of a successful co-parenting relationship, and having a plan is one of the best ways to help your children adjust and heal. ■



Dr. Ann Buscho, Ph.D., is the author of The Parent's Guide to Bird Nesting: A Child-Centered Solution to Co-Parenting Your Children During Separation and Divorce (Adams Media). Her mission is to help parents divorce respectfully and to stay out of court to protect their children. www.drannbuscho.com



Shared Parenting Pros and Cons

Is shared parenting better for children than sole custody? Here are the pros and cons to help you decide if shared parenting is right for your family.

By Dr. Donald A. Gordon and Dr. Jack Arbuthnot

Successful shared parenting benefits both children and parents; it is a sharp contrast to the problems of having only one resident parent. Shared parenting is increasing in frequency nationwide: in some states, shared parenting is the norm for 75% of parents. Unless there are particular problems, the court assumes this will be the parenting plan. You must present strong evidence to show why shared parenting would not be best for the children. Remember that shared parenting means shared decision-making. The parenting time, however, can vary from 50-50 shared time to 60-40 or even 65-35.

Seven Advantages of Shared Parenting

1. **Children in shared parenting have two psychological parents.** By maintaining regular contact with both their mother and father, they get a clear message that both parents love and want them. They feel important

to their family. They understand that their parents make great efforts to jointly care for them. They have psychological permission to love and be with both parents. Very few are confused by having two households and two sets of rules. Research shows that most children like having easy access to both Mom and Dad; they prefer this to being with only one parent at intervals.

2. **In 54 studies that compared children's outcomes in sole and shared custody families, children in shared-parenting families had better outcomes than children in sole-custody families.** The studies measured factors such as physical, emotional, and mental health; behavioral problems (e.g., delinquency, bullying, substance abuse); academic achievement; and quality of familial relationships (i.e., with parents, grandparents, stepparents, etc.)
3. **Studies find reduction of conflict in**

shared parenting families. Studies show re-litigation (going back to court) is cut in half. In one study, none of those families had relitigated. But over half of the one-residence parents had returned to court at least once. They went to battle over access or money. Sometimes when courts order shared parenting, one parent opposes it. Relitigation rates were the same for them as one-residence families. Low levels of conflict are in the best interests of the child. Parents and judges should make reducing conflict between parents their main goal. A parenting plan that will minimize conflict should have highest priority.

4. **Shared parenting can be a shield for children.** It can soften the harmful effects of parent conflict. A child's self esteem remains high in one-residence plans if parent conflict is low. But in shared parenting, a child's self-esteem stays high, even with parent

conflict. (Research has shown that continued conflict in shared parenting can be just as harmful as conflict in one-residence plans. Parents are sometimes still extremely bitter and angry. Conflict usually happens during exchanges of the child. In such cases, a neutral or public drop-off point may help. It could be at school, a mutual friend's home, or a fast food restaurant.)

5. **In a study of child support payments, about half of the sole residential parents received support checks regularly.** Of those who shared parenting, none had to return to court (although several would have liked more money). Many co-parenting nonresidential parents continue to provide financial support because they have an active parenting role. They do not feel like they have lost their children; they are not denied access; and the power relationship remains balanced. Most of these parents continue financial support after age 18 – crucial for children who want to go to college. Most absent parents refuse to help with college expenses, barring entry to higher education for many good students.
6. **Shared parenting provides advantages for childcare.** It can be a buffer against many of the problems of single parenthood. These moms and dads often rely on each other for substitute care. One-residence parents are often forced to rely on hired child sitters. This can worsen serious economic problems.
7. **Those who share parenting are less likely to “burn out.”** Demands are intense when trying to raise children alone. Many single parents become burned-out.

Five Disadvantages of Shared Parenting

1. **Persistent, high levels of conflict causes harm to children.** When high levels of conflict are continuing, it might be better to cut back on communications. Co-parents with pathological bitterness need professional assistance to help them redirect

their lives in more positive ways. They can learn to let go of the anger they feel. If domestic violence has occurred, a safety-focused parenting plan should be considered. In these cases, the parenting plan should be court-mandated rather than created by the parents. A safety-focused plan should include provisions for support services for the victim spouse and children, conditions the perpetrator must meet to enjoy contact with the children, and consequences for violating orders. The goal in high-conflict divorce should be parallel parenting with limited communication and a business-like relationship for the safety of each parent. When parents control their conflict, they are setting an example. This has long-term benefits for children, especially those who were exposed to violence.

2. **Shared parenting may limit a parent's mobility.** Parents who are serious about co-parenting must make personal sacrifices. The parents need to decide which living situation is best for the child; that parent will be responsible for the child's day-to-day care. A legal shared-parenting plan would still be desirable. Then the less active parent's role would not diminish. Long-distance parenting is very challenging, and both parents will need to make special efforts to maximize both physical and nonphysical contact.

3. **It may trouble an anxious child to go back and forth between homes.** Many parents separate when the children are infants or toddlers – or they may have never lived together. One parent may have little experience parenting. They may not have good parenting skills. In this case, shared parenting may not be the best plan. Inexperienced parents still need contact with their children. A bond will form and that parent will want to stay in the children's lives. Parents can improve their parenting skills by taking parenting classes or by using a good online parenting program. As their parenting skills improve, more shared parenting

time may be appropriate. A shared parenting plan – where one parent usually has primary responsibility for the physical care of the child – is almost always best for children. Most children report that transitions are not a problem, but there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to parenting plans.

4. **When couples have not been able to cooperate, they can do parallel parenting.** This means that each parent makes decisions about the children with little discussion with the other parent. If this continues for more than a year, the children often get put in the middle. They will be asked to carry messages and are quizzed about the other parent. It may be better for one parent to be the primary residential parent to avoid this stress on the children.
5. **Some parents think that having more time with their children guarantees a good relationship, but quantity is not a substitute for quality.** A high-quality parent-child relationship does not happen by itself or with more time. The good news is that parents can really improve their relationship with their children with parent education; classes are available in most communities, and many are also available online. The payoff for both parent and child is a closer, more respectful, and more fun relationship that lasts a lifetime. ■



This article was adapted with permission from What About the Children? A Simple Guide For Divorced/Separated And Divorcing Parents by Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) & Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.). The Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents

to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation has on children. www.divorce-education.com

Making Co-Parenting EASIER

Ease the challenge of co-parenting with an ex-spouse by planning ahead and seeking professional help if necessary.

By Brian James, Family Mediator



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

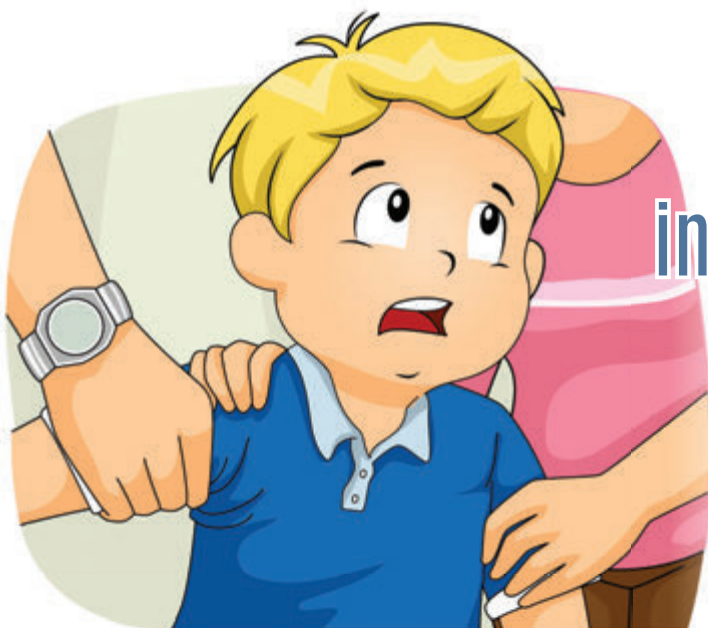
decisions. Hiring a mediator can help you get back on track and focus on how to help your kids in the situation. Having parents stand together on a parenting front can bring a huge amount of security to the kids.

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. ■



Brian James is an experienced divorce and family mediator with offices throughout Chicago and South-eastern Wisconsin. Brian runs a mediation

practice. www.celassociates.com



Parallel Co-Parenting in High-Conflict Divorce

Learn how to minimize arguments with your spouse and maximize both parents' involvement in your child's life.

By Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao, Clinical Psychologist

Parallel co-parenting developed as a way for parents – particularly those in high-conflict divorces – to focus their energy on raising their child by disengaging from problematic communication with their ex-spouse.

This does not require active cooperation and is a valuable model to consider if you feel that continued communication with your co-parent will be toxic for you and your ability to parent.

Parallel co-parenting minimizes conflict while maximizing the involvement that each parent has in their child's life. Parents disengage from their co-parent and the pattern of destructive communication. Children benefit because they are removed from being in the middle of their parent's fights. This model assumes that both parents are safe and healthy with the children.

9 Tips for Making Parallel Co-Parenting Work

Parents communicate to a minimal extent and in neutral ways for anything except emergencies. All communication is child-centered. Here are some specific tips for making this work during and after a high-conflict divorce:

1. Use a website (such as OurFamily Wizard.com) or parenting notebook for communication. Write down all relevant communications about your child's visit (bedtime, meals, homework, behavior, strategies that worked to soothe your child). It should summarize all the events, including emotional and behavioral, for the other parent.
2. Communication should maintain a business-like, respectful tone. It should focus only on the child's needs. The interactions should utilize the "BIFF response method": Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm.
3. Unscheduled verbal communication should be reserved for emergencies only.
4. Use email to communicate non-urgent issues and limit these emails to two times or fewer per month. Also, limit them to one topic.

5. For any issues or disagreements, work with a third party. This should be a neutral person, such as a mediator or therapist.
6. Transfer of children should occur at a neutral location, such as the school, a library, or a restaurant.
7. Each household operates independently.
8. Use a "Mom's house" and "Dad's house" mantra. The parent in that house determines the rules, chores, routines, and homework. Using this phrase also helps prevent kids from playing parents against each other.
9. Avoid being together at child-related events, such as sporting events or school concerts. Take turns attending.

High-Conflict Divorce Requires a Highly Specific Parenting Plan

This co-parenting model needs a highly specific parenting plan in order to minimize communication between the co-parents while meeting the needs of their individual children.

After a divorce, it's important that both parents remain involved in the life of their children regardless of their ability to work with each other. Parallel co-parenting is designed to allow both parents to be very involved in their children's lives without being involved in each other's lives.

Some parents may find that after years of practicing parallel co-parenting, they can move on to a more cooperative approach; other parents stick with this model for the long term because it minimizes the triggers for conflict. ■



Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao, Psy.D., has been in private practice since 2006, seeing children, adolescents, and adults individually and in family and couples therapy. Her experience and training have provided Dr. Conklin-Danao with the skills to work effectively with clients as a divorce coach and therapist. www.drconklindanao.com

The Benefits of Nesting After Divorce



Nesting can help you create a post-divorce life that benefits both you and your children: financially, practically, and emotionally.

By Beth Behrendt, Writer, Mom, and Nester

My ex, Bill, and I have been nesting with our three sons for over six years. Nesting, or “bird-nesting,” as it’s sometimes called, means the children stay in the family home after the divorce. It’s the parents who move in and out to take care of them.

Nesting offered stability to our kids during the inevitable chaos of divorce. We were able to reassure our sons that nothing major was going to change for them: they would be staying in our house, in their rooms, with all of their things. The one big difference was that their father and I would keep taking turns coming in and out of the house to care for them.

What You Should Know About Nesting

It’s not *just* the children who don’t have to move back and forth between two homes. What also does *not* move back and forth (or need to be duplicated in a second home) are:

- All their beloved personal possessions, toys, and books.
- Family pet(s).
- Clothing and toiletries.
- School books, homework, sports, and music equipment.
- All the furniture, electronics, food, and supplies needed for their care and upbringing.

In nesting, unlike the traditional broken-home, two-household approach, there is just one version of each of these things, in one home. This saves significantly on the cost of duplicating essentials in a second home. Nesting also means less stress to the kids (who don’t have to keep track of their possessions between two homes) and less hassle for the parents (who don’t have to spend time driving back and forth to retrieve whatever has been left at the other parent’s place).

Perhaps most importantly, nesting means your children continue to grow up with the consistency, continuity, and comforts of the home they know. Divorce is an unsettling time. Nesting offers a way

to lessen the trauma and provide a tangible sense of security for the children.

Nesting is gaining in popularity in all parts of the country. I've learned from the interviews I'm conducting for my book on nesting that families of all types are creating their own variations of nesting arrangements – creatively discovering what works best for their individual family.

Nesting Arrangements Can Evolve

The logistics and where and how my ex and I live and co-parent have evolved through the years. Originally, I lived in my parent's guestroom while Bill was with the boys for half of each week. He would stay with friends or travel for work the other half while I had my parenting time in the house with the boys.

After a few months of this arrangement, when we weren't yet positive that nesting was the right long-term solution, we decided to keep the same parenting time arrangement and rent a reasonably priced apartment nearby that Bill and I could "share" (neither of us was ever actually in it at the same time). This would relieve our friends and family of the burden of hosting each of us on a weekly basis, and it was certainly less expensive than buying a second house right away.

After about six months, we saw that nesting was working really well for our kids, but we both felt the need for space to explore our own lives. The finances of the divorce were settled, and we found that we could afford to keep the original apartment and Bill could rent a studio apartment of his own. The original apartment really began to feel like mine as I decorated it and moved my possessions out of the house and into my own space. When parenting at the house, I would pack a weekend bag of clothes, toiletries, and laptop and decamp to the guest bedroom suite at the house.

Bill found a furnished place downtown, but still a short drive from the boys and the home. He kept most of his possessions at the house (it was officially his, as per our divorce settlement).

In reverse of my part of the plan, he would pack a weekend bag of clothes, toiletries, and his laptop and head to his apartment when I came into the house to parent.

This situation worked really well until Bill began to travel extensively for work and found he was rarely using the studio apartment. We agreed it made sense for him to be based out of the house and give up the lease on the studio. I would keep my apartment. Our parenting-time schedule now was determined by his work-travel schedule as I would be in the house whenever he traveled. When he was in town and living at the house with the boys, I would return to my apartment.

Nesting and Shared Parenting Time

We were able to maintain an evenly shared parenting time each month, but some weeks had different schedules than others. Since the boys' daily routine didn't change, they had no problem rolling with this new arrangement (as long as they knew who would be picking them up from school that afternoon!).

And this is basically how we've lived for the past seven years, though Bill now travels less for work and spends his non-parenting time at his significant other's home.

Our sons were fairly young when we decided to divorce (12, 9, and 5). That we could tell them about our pending divorce, but immediately assure them that they weren't moving out of their home, was a true comfort to them. Our boys are now in college, high school, and middle school. Through all these changes, nesting has remained consistent and none of us can imagine life any other way.

We've All Benefited from Nesting

I love nesting for our boys' sake, but also for how it has benefited Bill and me. The boys' lives have remained



happily consistent while Bill and I have appreciated how our focused parenting time has enriched our relationships with them. Nesting has also allowed us to pursue time away from parenting (and the responsibilities of home-ownership) to explore our new lives as separate individuals.

Nesting has some challenges, of course, and it may not make sense for everyone. But does the traditional "broken home" approach in which the kids have to move between two houses *have to be the default scenario*?

If you are facing divorce and concerned about the impacts on your children, I hope you will seriously consider whether nesting could work in your situation – and help you create a post-divorce life that benefits both you and your family. ■



Beth Behrendt, a freelance writer and divorced mother of three, has written about nesting for The New York Times, Psychology Today, and Divorce Magazine. The founder of Family Nesting, her primary goal is to provide families with resources to navigate the stressful waters of divorce.

www.FamilyNesting.org

Tired of Feeling Angry at Your Co-Parent?

These 6 Tips Can Help.

When you're angry, you lose your ability to use reason and logic. Consider these six strategies to shift your thinking and move from emotionally reactive to calm and proactive when you're negotiating with your co-parent.

For many people, being angry with your co-parent is a recurring and challenging problem. When you're angry, you lose your ability to use reason and logic. You're in an emotionally reactive state, which makes you super-dumb and do super-dumb things. You must not negotiate with your co-parent while you're angry because you're negotiating about the most important thing to you – your children – and you need to be as grounded and smart as possible during these negotiations.

By Alisa Jaffe Holleron,
Co-Parenting Coach and Therapist



Consider these six strategies to shift your thinking and move from angry and super-dumb to calm and rational.

1 Learn to Sit with Anger.

Recognize anger for what it is: an intensely uncomfortable experience. There is a trigger, and “whoosh” the anger comes in. You never ask for it and you don’t want it, but it comes anyway. You may take anger very seriously, and think you have to do something about it. Just because it’s there, doesn’t mean that you have to do anything. Learning to just sit with the uncomfortable feeling will give you the time to think through whether action is needed and what the best action would be. Anger causes trouble; not because it is there, but because of what you do when it comes. Giving it space will either help you back off and not take action, or take action that is effective.

2 Anger Is an Emotionally Reactive State.

Emotionally reactive states like anger, frustration, resentment, and anxiety actually cause you to lose the part of your brain that exercises rationality and good judgment. Brain imaging shows that when people are in emotionally reactive states, the intelligent part of their brain essentially turns off. You do not want to take action when you are missing the most intelligent part of the brain. That is sure to get you into trouble! There are many ways to re-engage the part of your brain that shuts down when you get in emotionally reactive states. For instance, you could pause, breathe deeply, and practice mindfulness (see below).

3 Mindfulness Is a Simple but Powerful Skill for Working with Anger

Mindfulness is simply awareness. When anger comes, you can either be aware of it, or not. If you are not aware of it, anger will take control and you will be at its mercy. If you are mindful or aware, you can say, “hello anger, I see you’re here.” The part of you that can see that anger is there is not the anger. It is another part of you that is separate and distinct from anger. So now, instead of just having anger taking over the show, you have anger, and another part of you that isn’t anger. This gives you the choice to either act out of anger, or act from a more calm, rational part of you. Research has shown that people who practice mindfulness are much better at regulating their emotions. It also shows that the children of parents who practice mindfulness feel better about themselves. There are many resources for learning how to practice mindfulness.

4 Remember That Your Co-Parent Is Distressed

Often people think that their co-parents are intentionally difficult, and enjoy driving them crazy. As much as you might want to believe this, it is rarely if ever true. People behave badly because they are distressed. People who are happy, calm, and at peace with themselves don’t behave badly. Your ex is behaving the way they behave because they have some form of distress that they don’t know how to deal with. If you feel like your ex is behaving the way they are because they are intentionally trying to hurt you, you are going to be much more triggered than if you realize that they are just a mess inside. Think of them as struggling and suffering (which they are), and you won’t be as reactive. By the way, understanding that they are distressed does not mean you have to give in to them or do anything different. Cultivating an awareness of their distress simply helps you respond less reactively.

5 Anger Often Comes from Feeling Powerless

Co-parents often feel like they are powerless and their co-parent holds all the power. But this is not true! It is very common that both co-parents feel powerless and like their co-parent holds all the power. This is a very hard thing for many people to wrap their brain around. If you remember that your co-parent feels just as powerless as you do, you are likely to feel less angry. Remind yourself that just as you feel threatened, your co-parent also feels threatened.

6 When You Feel Yourself Get Angry, Focus on Your Children

Don’t let your anger take you away from your children. When you stay in emotionally reactive states, you are disconnected from your children. The more you can stay connected to your children, the more it will benefit them. The more you stay connected, the more it will benefit you. The more you stay connected the more it will benefit your relationship with your children as well. Ironically, co-parents are often angry because they are worried about their children. Remember that working on being connected is what they need most of all! ■



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Is it Possible to Co-Parent with a Narcissistic Ex-Spouse?

By Terry Gaspard, Licensed Therapist

Co-parenting with a difficult ex-spouse can be challenging to say the least. Here are eight strategies for dealing with a narcissistic, challenging, or high-conflict co-parent.

If one of the reasons why your marriage ended was due to your spouse being a narcissist, you probably hoped that things would get better for you and your children after your divorce. In many ways they might have since your daily life is no longer filled with turmoil. However, many parents who try co-parenting with a narcissistic ex-spouse soon realize it doesn't work any better than being married to them.

One of the most crucial things to keep in mind post-divorce when you were married to a narcissist or challenging ex is to set good boundaries. It's also important to abandon any thought of co-parenting successfully because you *can't* co-parent with someone who is self-absorbed. After all, the premise of a co-parenting plan is cooperation and the commitment to putting your children's needs *first* – which is impossible for a narcissist.



What is the solution for parents who want to co-parent with an ex who is narcissistic or challenging? According to Dr. Edward Kruk, Ph.D., “Parallel parenting is an arrangement in which divorced parents are able to co-parent by means of disengaging from each other, and having limited contact in situations where they have demonstrated that they are unable to communicate with each other in a respectful manner.”

Parallel parenting allows parents to remain disengaged from one another (and have a parenting plan) while they remain close to their children. For instance, they remain committed to making responsible decisions (medical, education, etc.) but decide on the logistics of day-to-day parenting separately.

Here are eight strategies for dealing with a narcissistic, challenging, or high-conflict co-parent.

1 Set Firm Boundaries for Your Kids

Since their life with their other parent is unpredictable, you will have to provide stability. High-conflict personalities thrive on the possibility of combat. Be prepared and write a script to use when talking to him/her and try to stick to it, using as few words as possible. For instance, if he/she tries to persuade you to change the parenting plan, say something like: “I’m not comfortable with this idea. I’m sure you have good intentions, but this won’t work for me.”

2 Limit Your Contact with Your Ex

Don’t take frequent calls from your children when they are with the other parent (unless there is an emergency). If you speak often, your ex might react in an angry way toward your kids or put you down in front of them.

3 Be the Parental Role Model Your Kids Need to Thrive

Show compassion toward your children and don’t bad-mouth their other parent in their presence. Children are vulnerable to experiencing loyalty conflicts and shouldn’t be in the middle between their parents. Be aware of your tone and facial expressions during interactions with your ex in front of your kids.

4 Keep Your Eye on the Big Picture in Terms of Your Children’s Future

Although it’s stressful trying to deal with a difficult ex, remember that your children will be more resilient if you put your frustration and “emotional baggage” aside for their sake. Adopt realistic expectations and pat yourself on the back for working at this challenging relationship for your kids.

5 Focus on the Only Thing You Can Control – Your Own Behavior!

You alone are responsible for your reactions to your ex’s

comments and behavior. But don’t be persuaded by your ex to do something that you’re uncomfortable with just to keep the peace. Adopt a business-like “just the facts, ma’am” style of communicating with him/her.

6 Don’t Become Emotional or Apologize to Your Ex

Don’t express genuine emotion to your ex or apologize for wrongdoing in the relationship. If your ex is a perilous or abusive narcissist, they might interpret your apology as proof of your incompetence and use it against you, according to Virginia Gilbert, Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT).

7 Make Sure Your Parenting Plan Is Structured and Highly Specific

Spell out schedules, holidays, vacations, etc. to minimize conflict. Using a communication notebook to share important details with your ex can be an essential tool to help you stay detached and business-like. Check out websites and articles on parallel parenting.

8 Seek Help from Counselors, Mediators, or Other Supportive Professionals

Make sure you have plenty of support from a lawyer, friends, family, and a therapist. Use a third-party mediator when needed. Educate yourself about strategies to deal with a difficult or high-conflict ex. Therapists who utilize cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) are usually the most successful in dealing with survivors of a relationship with an ex who has a personality disorder.

In many cases, co-parenting is a wonderful opportunity for children of divorce to have close to equal access to both parents – to feel close to both of their parents. However, few experts discuss the drawbacks of co-parenting when one parent is hands-off, has a high-conflict personality, or a personality disorder such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

It’s essential that you take an honest look at the effect your ex’s behaviors and the dynamics in your co-parenting relationship are having on you and your children. Once you accept that you can only control your own behavior – not a person with a difficult or high-conflict personality – your life will greatly improve. After all, you and your children deserve to have a life filled with love and happiness! ■



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15 **DOS and Don'ts** for Co-Parenting with a Toxic Ex



The more toxic an ex-spouse, the more problems there will be moving forward – especially if there are minor children.

By Henry Gornbein, Family Lawyer

There is more than one aspect to a divorce. First is the legal divorce, where the judge ends the marriage and a document known as a Judgment of Divorce or similar paper is entered with the court, legally ending your marriage. Just as important, and in some divorces of overriding importance, is the psychological divorce. The psychological divorce is the ability of one or both spouses to move on to the next chapter of their lives.

In particularly nasty divorces, one or the other is unable to move on due to anger, bitterness, and emotional or psychological problems, just to give some examples. The more toxic an ex-spouse, the more problems there will be moving forward, especially if there are minor children.

Tips for Co-Parenting with a Toxic Ex

1. If your communication with your ex is poor, it is important to spell out every aspect of parenting time/visitation with the children. In some cases, pick-ups and drop-offs should be specified down to the minute. There should be a 15- or 30-minute grace period if someone is running late, but everything must be in a written order of the court. This puts teeth into the agreement or judgment if there are continuing problems.
2. There must be language in the judgment spelling out that neither parent shall denigrate the other in front of the children and that neither parent shall put the children in the middle of the continuing disputes and/or toxicity of the warring parents.
3. If you cannot pick up the phone and deal with issues civilly, then it is critical to put everything in writing. This can be done through emails, text messages, or even websites such as Our Family Wizard®.
4. In some cases, parents will videotape every exchange regarding the children for visitation. This can result in dueling cell phones and, frankly, the courts do not like these situations.
5. Sometimes pick-ups and drop-offs should be in front of a witness to prevent false allegations or escalation of problems in front of the children.
6. In some cases, parents should pick up and drop off the children at the foot of the driveway.
7. In other cases, there should be pick-ups and drop-offs in a public place such as a library or restaurant.
8. In extreme cases, pick-ups and drop-offs should be at police stations. This is clearly not ideal for the children, however.
9. Dealing with extracurricular activities and school events can be tricky with a toxic ex-spouse. Be sure that everyone is notified and that each parent has notices of all sporting events, school activities, and other extracurricular activities.
10. To avoid future problems, issues over expenses for extracurricular activities, such as baseball, hockey, dance, or other events, should be negotiated and clearly spelled out in the divorce or settlement agreement.
11. In extreme cases, the court may appoint a therapist or attorney to act as a parenting coordinator to deal with the ongoing disputes involving children and parenting time/visitation schedules.
12. In other cases, the court might appoint an attorney to represent the children as the legal guardian known as Guardian ad Litem (GAL) to protect the legal rights of the children.
13. In some cases, the court might order the parents and children to work with a counselor or psychologist to help deal with these ongoing problems.
14. Sometimes the parents can be put into mediation to try to resolve these continuing disputes without the need for a formal hearing.
15. Last, but not least, in some cases – which I call the never-ending divorce where one parent cannot or will not move on with life and prolongs the

custody battle – a court can hold a formal hearing. In these hearings, I have seen one parent lose many of his or her rights and time with the children – and in extreme cases, lose custody altogether and be forced to see the children only on a supervised basis.

The most important point to remember is this: your children are the innocent victims of your divorce

- Do not put them in the middle of your ongoing battles.
- Do not show them the court papers.
- Do not alienate the children from the other parent.
- Remember that children understand more than you realize, and the more power they are given, the more they are going to try to manipulate and play one parent against the other.
- Try to step back and remember that your children should be free to love each of their parents unconditionally. ■



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Best Practices When Communicating with Your Co-Parent

The better you communicate, the healthier your co-parenting relationship will be. Here's a frame of reference to engage in healthy communication and forge a new relationship with your ex.

By Jessica Hoffmann, Family Lawyer

Getting a divorce when children are involved means that you will have a long-term relationship with your former spouse. For some, communicating with your co-parent may feel like a Herculean task. If you're one of those people who have a hard time handling regular co-parenting communication with your ex, we've put together some best practices for you.

1 Your New Relationship with Your Ex-Spouse Is a Long-Term One

While you may no longer be married, you are co-parents to one or more children. Weekly, if not daily, communication is necessary regarding your children. Communication will be more frequent when children are younger and will likely decrease as they age. However, even after children reach 18 and leave the house, your co-parent will still be part of your life.

Who will the children spend holidays and summers with when no longer governed by your divorce decree? Should you have an agreement about giving your children spending money? When they get married and start a family on their own, how will the logistics of family events be handled? The answers to these questions will likely hinge on your relationship not only with your children but with your ex as well.

Healthy co-parenting communication will improve family dynamics.

Your children link you with your (ex)spouse for life. The better you communicate, the healthier your relationship will be. You can't be petty during the divorce and believe that won't impact how your children, or your ex, treat you at key events like high school and college graduation, wedding ceremonies, and the birth of grandchildren.

2 Consider the Legal Ramifications of Your Communication About Your Co-Parent

Many divorce decrees contain specific prohibitions regarding what you can or cannot say about your ex. Often these prohibit making negative statements about your ex to your children. However, you also need to be careful not to say things publicly that could result in a claim of slander or defamation.

If you are hurt and lash out with public comments that make your ex look bad, those comments may result in harm to their reputation or value. Not only could this impact their ability to help support your children, but you could also be subject to civil liabilities for these statements.

Beyond that, depending on the age of your children, they may hear these comments directly or from others and it could hurt their relationship with their ex and with you as well. They may lose respect for you if you are saying negative things about their other parent.

3 Keep a Record of All of Your Communication

Keeping track of all of your communication will keep you organized. It can also protect you down the road if your ex wants to decrease child support, increase their share of custody, change schools, or move outside the county or state.

You can't be petty during the divorce and believe that won't impact how your children, or your ex, treat you at key events like high school and college graduation, wedding ceremonies, and the birth of grandchildren.

There are several methods you can use to help you organize and store your ongoing communication.

One is via email. However, you need to ensure that you are regularly archiving and backing up the emails.

Another is texting. Beware of firing off an angry/abusive text while you're furious with your co-parent, though – that could come back to haunt you if your custody case goes to court.

Another method is to use a dedicated co-parenting tool that allows you to communicate inside the application itself or via text message while storing the communications automatically. That way, you can avoid "he said/she said" situations because these messages cannot be edited, tampered with, or deleted.

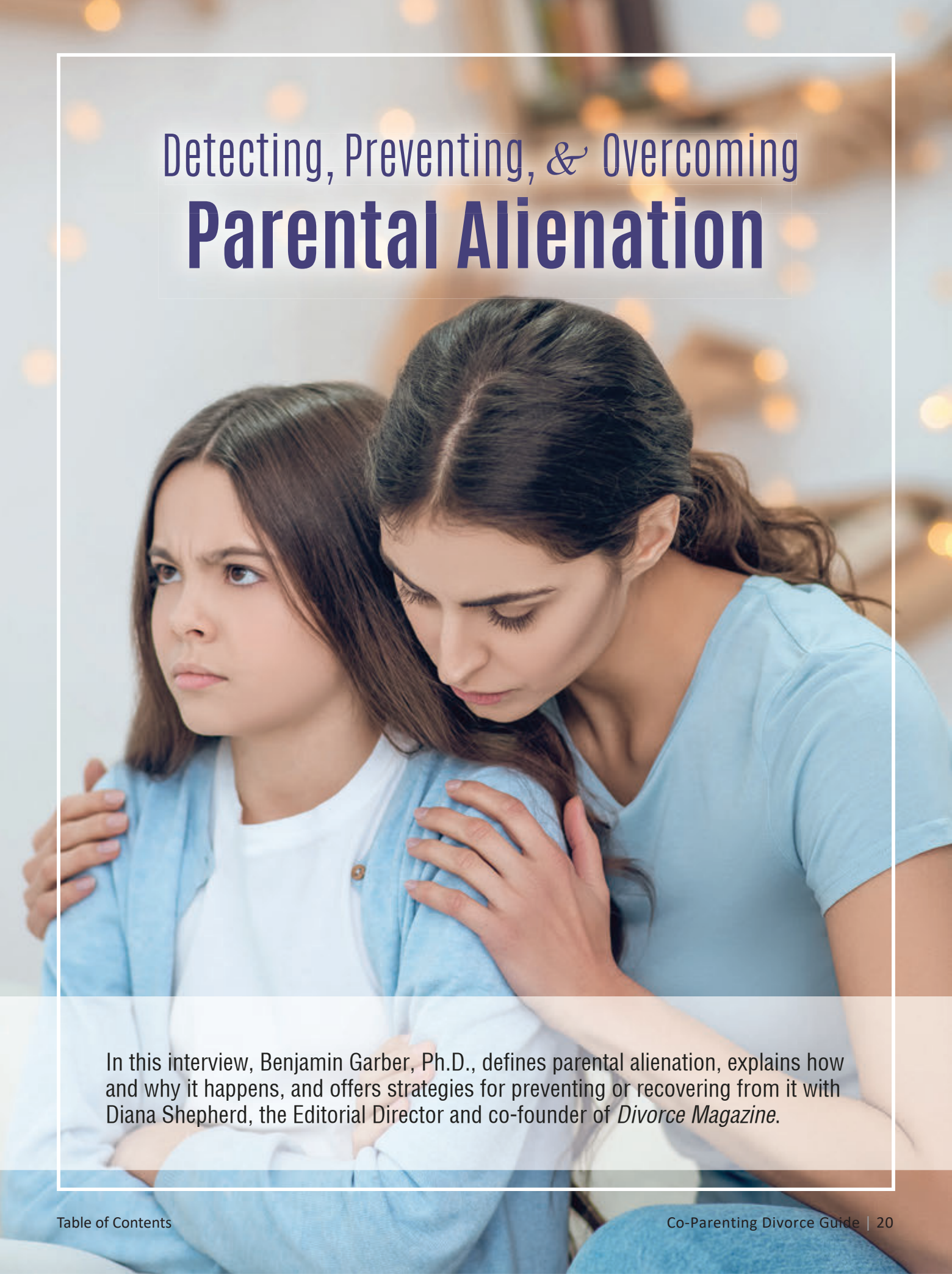
Tools like these improve behavior because both you and your ex know that communication is being tracked and stored. Elevating the communication you are receiving initially will decrease the back and forth and set a standard for proceeding in a healthy way.

Linking such a tool with your attorney can also save you time and money. You can be more efficient by sharing calendar appointments and tracking joint expenses through this kind of service. ■



Jessica Hoffmann is the Founder and CEO of FamilyDocket, a software application that helps family law attorneys and their clients automatically track and aggregate text messages, maintain expense reimbursement requests, and securely store and access documents.

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A photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a light blue t-shirt, hugging a young girl from behind. The girl has long brown hair and is wearing a white t-shirt under a light blue cardigan. She has a sad or angry expression on her face, looking off to the side. The background is blurred with warm, bokeh lights.

Detecting, Preventing, & Overcoming Parental Alienation

In this interview, Benjamin Garber, Ph.D., defines parental alienation, explains how and why it happens, and offers strategies for preventing or recovering from it with Diana Shepherd, the Editorial Director and co-founder of *Divorce Magazine*.

When the other parent intentionally turns the children against you, it becomes difficult – if not impossible – to have a successful co-parenting relationship. Knowing what symptoms and behaviors to watch out for in your children will help you determine whether or not parental alienation is occurring, and this interview offers steps you can take to lessen the corrosive effects.

Diana Shepherd: Dr. Garber, what is parental alienation?

Benjamin Garber: When co-parents are in high conflict and either parent exposes the child to unwarranted negatives about the other, the result can be very destructive. It can cause the child to feel a “loyalty bind,” as if loving one parent will cost him the love of the other or is a betrayal of the other. We generally call this dynamic “parental alienation.”

Why does this happen?

I wish I knew the answer. I’m not sure that anybody does clearly. What we conclude about the parents who engage in this very destructive process is that the stresses of losing an intimate relationship, whether it’s through a divorce or otherwise, can cause people to act out in very selfish and immature ways. Putting your own needs first before those of the child is destructive to a child and is antithetical and counter to the needs of the child him or herself.

What are the warning signs that the other parent may be trying to turn the children against you?

Once again, I wish that we had a clear set of criteria. Unfortunately, we don’t – but the most obvious signs would be the child’s uncharacteristic resistance to the targeted parent. They refuse to

spend time with that person, express anxiety about being in proximity to that person, and make choices that appear as though they are being forced to choose sides.

Should the targeted parent confront the alienating parent? What’s the best way to address these concerns?

“Confront” sounds like an aggressive word, but there should be a discussion between the adults. Psychology and family law generally take the position that no matter the quality of the intimate adult relationship, parents who share responsibility for a child – “co-parents” – must continue to cooperate, communicate, and maintain consistency of parenting practices to support their children.

Co-parents have to fit together in a way that creates a safety net under the child. Alienation occurs when the co-parents are not cooperating, and the child falls through the gaps in that net. A child might feel happy because nobody is making them go to bed or enforcing rules. When they go to Mom’s, they can eat M&Ms for breakfast – but Dad makes them eat broccoli for dinner. Those inconsistencies are signs of budding insecurity; the child no longer feels held by their parents.

No matter the quality of the intimate adult relationship, co-parents must work together to support the child – including the child’s right to maintain a healthy relationship with *both* parents.

Can parental alienation have long-term negative effects on children?

Being taught early in life that you have to choose between the people who care about you – that loving one person is a betrayal of another – can undermine

a child’s ability to develop appropriate self-esteem and healthy relationships as they reach adolescence and adulthood.

What can someone do to prevent parental alienation or mitigate its effects?

Destructive dynamics, including parental alienation, can happen even within intact families. You don’t need to separate and you certainly don’t need to divorce for your child to be at risk of being pulled into that sort of destructive triangulation. The best prevention for all of us – regardless of marital status, the adults’ gender, the age of the child, or the law – is always going to be constructive proactive child-centered communication amongst the adults.

We as caregivers and professionals who take care of children and are focused on their needs must make sure we protect children. That Billy might be seven or 12 or 15 and might be really smart and even socially skilled, but he’s still a little boy underneath the surface. Too many professionals – and too many parents, for that matter – are fooled by façades of social skills, or vocabulary, or grades. Then they fall into the trap of saying, “Oh, he gets it. It’s okay. I can tell him what a witch his Mom is or what a jerk his Dad is.” But we can’t say that sort of thing to a child! We really must give children the opportunity within the limits of safety to develop a healthy relationship with each of their parents on their own, never fearing that loving one is a betrayal of the other.

Is there any hope of resuming a healthy relationship with a child once it has been poisoned?

Of course! There are a few targeted therapies – sometimes referred to as reunification or reconciliation therapies – that can be very helpful. They

No matter the quality of the intimate adult relationship, co-parents must work together to support the child – including the child's right to maintain a healthy relationship with both parents.

are usually or routinely court-ordered therapies, so you can't just Google "reunification therapist," you need to go through a court process to make this happen.

What is the success rate of this reunification or reconciliation therapy?

I wish I had statistics for you. I don't. We have no organized way to collect that data – partly because all of these therapies are confidential. And in part, because they're court-ordered, the data that comes out of them is very closely protected by the lawyers who are involved.

What can be done to prove parental alienation in court?

When a child rejects one parent and becomes overly close to the other, the technical term is "enmeshment." The data that we have suggest that alienation almost never occurs by itself. In the field, we refer to "the hybrid model": the notion that there is some combination of enmeshment and alienation when a child is allied with one parent and rejecting the other.

The only way of getting at understanding whether or not parental alienation is occurring in the family is to participate in what's commonly called a custody evaluation, conducted by a specially trained mental health professional. In many jurisdictions, we no longer use the word custody, although it's familiar to many people. It carries with it connotations of ownership, and no one owns another human being, especially a child.

The other keywords to look for – the phrase that I use in my office, for example – are "child-centered family evaluation." This is a very intense, very detailed look at all of the dynamics within the family system in order to advise the court on how best to

understand and serve the child's needs, including and especially the quality of the child's relationship with each of his or her parents.

Any last pieces of advice to offer our readers?

It's easy to get hung up on the labels. And reading this interview, I can imagine that people might say, "A-ha! Well, that's what's going on. He or she is alienating me or she's enmeshed." And that may be so: it does happen, and it's a nasty situation that can be very hurtful to children. But more important than the labels – and certainly more important than which lawyer you hire, which court you're in, or how much of the child's college fund you spend in the process of divorcing – is simply taking the high road yourself as a caregiver and putting your child's needs first.

Never lower yourself to the level of what you believe the other parent might be doing. And open those lines of communication, which really calls for maturity, your ability to pick your battles, and your ability to bite your tongue and control your impulses.

Co-parenting post-marriage, when the intimate relationship is over, should be like a business relationship where the business is the child, and the product you want to produce is the child's health, and their well-being. If every parent out there could do that, I would happily be out of a job. ■



Benjamin Garber, Ph.D., is a NH licensed psychologist and a parenting coordinator. He has served as an expert witness in a number of states, and his experience includes arguments against "parental alienation syndrome," the critique and review of Guardian ad litem, and as a custody evaluator.
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Tips for Successful Co-Parenting

There are ways to make co-parenting more effective for both parents and easier on the kids. Here are some tips for successful cooperative parenting after divorce.

By Wendi Schuller, Therapist and Author

Co-parenting is a relatively modern term in the divorce world. When my parents walked out of divorce court, they never communicated with each other ever again – about me or any other topic. Co-parenting implies cooperation and dialogue: former spouses are no longer partners in marriage, but are still partners in raising their children.

Today, divorcing parents have many more choices than

the previous generation – or perhaps parents like mine simply did not see the need to discuss their children with each other post-divorce. Custody is usually joint, which means both parents have the right to decide what schools and activities their children will attend – and from time to time, they will have to discuss issues and opportunities that arise in their children's lives.

The “don’ts” of co-parenting can mostly be avoided by thinking about what is in the children’s best interests

How to Make Cooperative Parenting Easier

There are ways to make co-parenting easier – both for parents and for children. Consider having a regularly scheduled meeting, perhaps monthly, to discuss new issues or activities. Have an agenda, just as you would for a conference at work.

If one parent veers off course into blame, anger, or other toxic areas, calmly steer them back to the topic being discussed: “We were talking about Jane’s wish to change schools,” for example. Keep emotion out of the discussion, and treat the other parent as you would an excitable co-worker: with calm, but firm, courtesy. These meetings don’t have to be in person if it is difficult to be in your ex’s presence. Using Skype or the phone is fine, even if they only live a few streets away.

Co-parenting is easier when both parents are on the same page and don’t feel left out of anything. There are various online calendars and apps (such as www.OurFamilyWizard.com) that let each parent view and add activities or events in the youngsters’ lives – such as dance recitals, sports tournaments, and school concerts – as well as track parenting time. Add these to a shared schedule as soon as you know about them; that way, one parent cannot blame the other one for not notifying them about an important event in their children’s lives. Remember to keep grandparents up-to-date on the kids’ events so they can attend, if possible.

Some parents have a notebook that goes back and forth between homes, which is particularly helpful with young children. For instance, if a child has an asthma attack or a severe allergic reaction to food, you can make a note of it, letting your co-parent know when an inhaler or EpiPen was administered. This also is useful for medical conditions like seizures. If there are incidents at school or other information that needs to be relayed, the notebook is another method of both sharing and recording the details.

Consistency and Teamwork

An important part of co-parenting is setting up consistent rules, routines, and consequences in both homes. Kids require constancy in their topsy-turvy world. Going to bed and eating meals at vastly different times is like having chronic jet lag. They feel more secure with a routine, and it is better for their physical and mental well-being. This also avoids pitting one parent against the other one; you won’t have to deal with “Dad lets me go to bed at 11” or “Mom lets me watch TV all day.” When kids realize that their parents are on the same team – even though they no longer live in the same home – and that the rules are consistent in both homes, then they

are less likely to try and get away with things.

Work together when dividing up holidays. Some parents each have the kids for part of the special day, and others trade holidays on alternate years. There may be new step-siblings, who also have to share holidays with another parent, to work into your holiday schedules. Some co-parents have a get-together with new partners and grandparents and do okay in each other’s company. See what works best in your situation.

If Co-Parenting Is Difficult...

The “don’ts” of co-parenting can mostly be avoided by thinking about what is in the children’s best interests. Yes, it is hard to put your ego aside or not to consider punishing your ex by “forgetting” to enter the dates of the school play on your shared electronic calendar. Getting back at an ex through the children is not healthy and can backfire. One father took his sons to a show during the divorce that he knew his wife would get angry about. The boys – who were upset seeing an adult-themed play with scantily-clad women – told the interim psychologist, who put a stop to this behavior. Later, they discussed this and more events with the custody evaluator; the mother ended up with physical custody and the father was not granted any overnight visitation.

If co-parenting is difficult, consider having a third party handle all communication between you. One woman had her friend edit out any mean comments from her ex-husband’s emails and then forward them to her. Others have used a mediator or some other professional to take care of all messages and communication between co-parents.

Technology can help. For instance, the Message Board on the “Our Family Wizard” website and app has a feature called “ToneMeter.” Described as an “emotional spell-check,” ToneMeter helps you identify and flag emotionally-charged sentences within your message and adjust the overall tone.

The bottom line is that co-parenting is a learning process and generally gets easier as time goes by – especially if parents are able to check their egos and put their children first. ■



Wendi Schuller is an author, nurse, and hypnotherapist who is certified in Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP). Her most recent book is The Global Guide to Divorce (Austin Macauley Publishers, 2015), and she is a featured author on www.DivorcedMoms.com and a regular blogger for www.DivorceMag.com. www.globalguidetodivorce.com

Long-Distance Co-Parenting After Divorce

It's crucial for long-distance parents to make frequent contact with their children. Here are six ways to stay connected with your child after divorce.

By Terry Gaspard, Licensed Therapist and Author

Divorce presents families with many challenges, and living at a distance is one of the most difficult to cope with for both parents and children. It's never easy for children to be separated from their parents, whether it's because of a brief business trip or a move across the country due to a job or personal reason. Likewise, many parents miss their kids when they don't see them on a daily or even weekly basis.

After divorce, it's crucial for parents to make the utmost effort to keep in touch with their

children when they live in a different state or country. Parents need to make the additional effort because children often experience loyalty conflicts that may make it hard for them to reach out to their non-custodial parent. They may feel stuck in the middle between their parents – especially if their mom and dad don't get along.

It's also normal for children and young adults whose parents have separated or divorced to experience feelings of loss and rejection when one of their parents moves away. Likewise,



children raised by a stepparent may experience some of these same emotions if they are close to their stepparent and they move out or lose contact with them after divorce.

One 17-year-old posted this message on my blog: “Can I have a good relationship with my dad from a 300-mile distance?” Another teenager asked: “Is it possible for me to stay close to my mom now that she lives half-way across the country?” Inherent in both of these questions is the child-of-divorce’s desire to maintain a loving connection with his or her parent.

While it’s probably more common for fathers to live at a distance from their children after a divorce or breakup, some mothers may need to move due to career or personal reasons and may be separated from their children at times. Consequently, the following long-distance parenting tips were written in a gender-neutral manner.

6 Long-Distance Ways to Stay Connected with Your Kids

1 Email or mail your child or teenager funny or interesting postcards once a month.

If you have more than one child, some group cards are acceptable. Make sure to make the messages positive, such as “I can’t wait until our visit next month!” or “Good luck on your spelling test.”

2 Call your child at various times.

While it’s a good idea to have a regular time to call your child, spontaneous phone calls can be a nice surprise and help your child know that you are thinking of him/her.

3 Be creative and use text, Skype or other video chat, email, and Instagram in addition to regular phone calls.

Be sure to send photos and ask questions about their week, such as: “How was the sleepover at Shana’s house?”

4 Get acquainted with your children’s friends and try to include one or more “BFFs” on vacations and outings.

Meeting the parents of your children’s friends can be a big plus because they will feel more comfortable if you invite them on a weekend excursion such as a camping trip or a stay at a hotel.

5 Show that you are attuned to your child’s interests and engage in small talk about them.

Research online and in-person ways to engage with him or her about their favorite sports, hobbies, and other special interests.

6 Spend quality time with your children when they visit.

If you have a new partner in your life, don’t introduce them unless you’re fairly sure it’s a permanent relationship.

Don’t Let Guilt Get in Your Way

It often comes down to a matter of quantity versus quality time when you’re parenting after divorce. Try not to let guilt get in the way and make the best of the situation by focusing on the quality of contact and not the amount of time you are together.

In the years to come, your adult child won’t remember the exact hours you spend with him or her, but they’ll remember the love, care, and concern you showed them. So be sure to make the most of the time you have when you’re with your kids and make those moments count.

What About Introducing Your Child to a New Partner?

One of the biggest mistakes parents can make is introducing their children to a new love-interest too soon after divorce. Be sure to have special time with your children, apart from your new partner, and give them time to adjust to the divorce before you introduce them to your love interest. This is especially important for long-distance parents who have less time with their kids.

Your child or teenager may show interest in your new partner – girls particularly tend to do this – but later feel

rejected if they believe they are missing out on quality time with you. What’s the hurry? There’s no such thing as an instant family, and healing takes place over the course of many years.

It’s great if you meet someone you care about, but hopefully you’ll wait to introduce them to your child once the relationship seems permanent. It’s important to assure your kids that your new partner will not replace their other parent or change your relationship with them.

Experts agree that most young children find their parents’ dating behaviors confusing after divorce – they may even feel threatened or resentful about having to share their parent with another person. So tread lightly and consult a counselor or divorce coach if you need more in-depth information about how to help your young child to feel more secure.

If you have a new partner, adopt realistic expectations about your children’s acceptance of him/her. Just because you are enthralled with this person, it doesn’t mean that your kids will share your enthusiasm.

When you see your children, be sure to focus on your relationship and develop new rituals and traditions – such as movie nights – that can help to solidify your bond.

It’s normal to miss your children when you don’t see them every day, and letting them know this can be healing. On the other hand, if you stay connected with your kids after divorce, you need not be overwhelmed with guilt or self-blame. It’s best to focus on things you can control such as maintaining regular communication and staying tuned into their interests and passions. ■



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5 Things You Must Do When Co-Parenting After Divorce

After divorce, civil co-parenting is essential. How well you co-parent will determine how well your child adjusts to the new family dynamic – as well as shuttling between mom’s house and dad’s house.

By Cathy Meyer, Relationship Coach

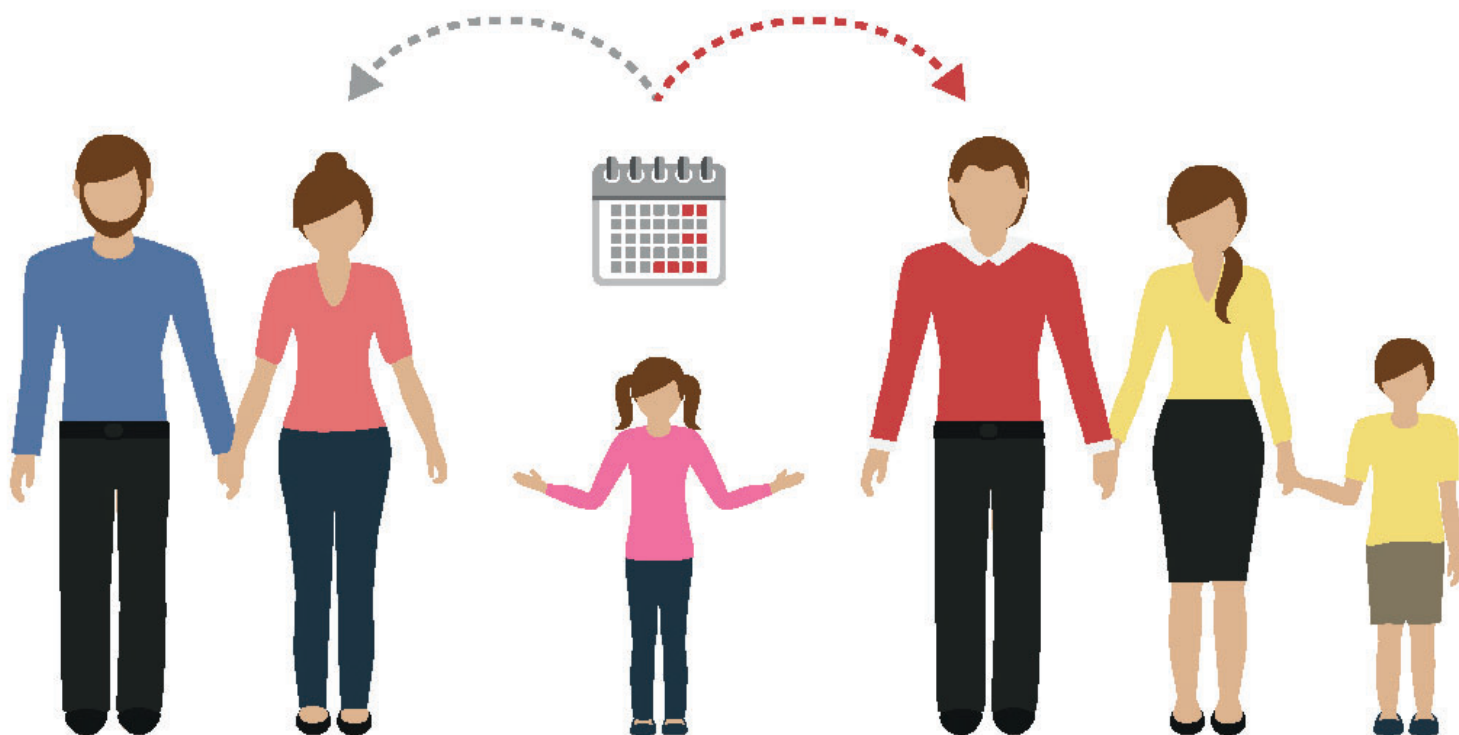
If you have children and are divorcing, your focus should be on effectively co-parenting both during and after divorce.

Here are five suggestions that will make co-parenting easier – and allow your children to suffer fewer negative consequences of your divorce.

1 Choose Shared Custody

Although not all situations are optimal for 50/50 shared custody, if you and your ex are both loving and involved parents, the best thing you can do for your children is give them equal time with each of you.

Aside from your regular day-to-day responsibilities – like making sure your children have nutritious food to eat, clean clothes to wear, and that they are in school before the bell rings every weekday morning – your main priority during and after your divorce should be to effectively co-parent your children.



Beginning the divorce process by being willing to share your children with each other, in spite of any negative feelings you may have for one another, is a good place to start. Divorce will end your marriage; it won't end your role as a parent and, let's face it, you will be forever connected to each other by your children. You might as well put your best foot forward when dealing with that lifelong situation.

2 Put Your Children's Needs First

Divorce does not end your responsibility to care for your child's financial, emotional, and physical needs. The emotional or financial stress you are experiencing does not excuse you from putting your children's needs above your own.

Don't fall prey to the belief that children are resilient and can wait for you to be supportive and attentive to their needs until you have finalized your divorce. Be fully present with your children – who now need you more than ever before – and do whatever you can to make sure their life runs smoothly both during and after your divorce. Keep their schedule as regular as possible, and don't uproot your children from school, friends, or family until your and your co-parent have agreed upon a parenting plan that works for everyone. If you've moved out of the family home, make sure to talk to your children daily and see them several times a week.

Of course you have needs, too – but those needs will never trump the need your child has to feel secure. If you want to start dating again, or spend the day at the spa, or go for a girls' night out, wait until the children are with your ex to indulge those needs.

3 Don't Put Your Children in the Middle

A concerned and loving parent does everything within their power to keep divorce from hurting their children. These parents do not expect or want their child to share their anger or resentment toward the other parent.

Your child will take his/her cues from you. If you treat your co-parent with respect and civility, it allows your child to feel safe loving both of you. If you disrespect the other parent or share inappropriate information about the divorce – like their other parent's affair or other "wrongdoings" – with your child, that puts them in a position where they feel that they have to choose sides. Listen to your child when they express their feelings and validate, not dismiss those feelings. Don't use your child as a messenger between his/her parents. Allow your child to be a child by remaining the mature, adult parent during and after your divorce.

4 Don't Try to Turn Your Child Against the Other Parent

Don't share private or misleading information about the divorce that paints your co-parent as the villain and you as the innocent victim with your child. You will create a painful loyalty conflict for them, and make them feel as though they have to hate their other parent if they love you.

Cutting a child off from their other parent causes that child great emotional pain and distress. You might not like your co-parent, or you might wish to punish them by turning their children against them, but – unless your ex is an addict, a criminal, or has a history of domestic violence – it is not your place to decide whether they have a right to parent their child.

Parental Alienation can occur when one parent persuades their child into disengaging from or actively hating the other parent. Speaking negatively about and/or willfully withholding a child from the other parent can cause Parental Alienation – as can blaming the other parent for their own financial problems, or withholding or providing the wrong information to the other parent about the child's appointments and special events (like the school play or their soccer game).

Some parents use their children as weapons against the other parent if they feel they have been wronged. What better way to hurt someone than to restrict their ability to spend time with and openly love and be loved by their own child?

The problem with parental alienation is it eventually backfires. If you engage in alienating your child from their loving, caring, other parent, then one day that child will realize that you used them as pawns in your game of revenge – and then you'll find yourself the focus of that child's anger and disgust. When you attempt to alienate your child from your co-parent, you are doing potentially irreparable damage to that child's ability to love and be loved as well as endangering your future relationship with your child.

5 Be Flexible

If 50/50 shared parenting is not going to work in your family's situation, be flexible when it comes to visitation with the non-custodial parent. Don't hold your child or the other parent to a rigid schedule that will exclude one parent from important events.

If your child is involved in sports or after-school activities, allow your co-parent to share the responsibility and pleasure of those activities with your child. If your ex calls and wants to take the child out for a burger or movie and it isn't "their night," let your child decide whether to go or not. And if you have a special event to attend, ask your co-parent if they'd switch nights or weekends with you – and be sure to return the favor!

The key is to make your parenting plan child-focused, not parent-focused. In other words, if your child has a desire to spend extra time with your co-parent, decide based on the child's needs and desires – not your own. ■



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two. www.DivorcedMoms.com



5 Reasons to Buy Gifts for Your Co-Parent After Divorce

By Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao,
Divorce Coach and Therapist

You don't have to help your kids buy gifts for your ex, but it can improve your relationship with them.

If you and your ex-spouse haven't discussed or agreed upon how to deal with "special days" — such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, holidays, and birthdays — in your parenting plan, you should consider what obligations you have to help your children celebrate with their other parent. This could include buying gifts for your ex-spouse on behalf of the children you share.

You certainly don't have to continue helping your kids with these celebrations, but here are five reasons why you should consider it.

1 It Helps Your Kids Be Kids

If you help your child organize a gift/card/celebration in the same way you did before the divorce, it helps your child remain a kid. The goal of all divorced parents is to help their children grow up feeling like a “normal” kid. Providing this kind of help is an easy way to support that goal. You would never have expected your 5-year-old or 10-year-old (or even your teen-aged) child to organize a celebration pre-divorce, so supporting them with these events takes a load of pressure off of them.

2 It Keeps Your Kids out of the Middle

One of the biggest fears that children have after a divorce is that enjoying the company of one parent hurts the other parent. By helping your child do something nice for your co-parent, you’re showing them that it’s ok to love and have fun with both parents.

Put your child’s happiness first. Get excited about the celebration they’re going to have with your co-parent. Ask questions ahead of time and look over any pictures they may have taken when they return. Too often, children of divorce are expected to compartmentalize their experiences to avoid hurting the other parent’s feelings – and this can be exhausting for them.

3 It Shows That Post-Divorce Parenting Can Be Positive

One of the key predictors of a child’s well-being after a divorce is the amount of conflict between their parents. The lower the conflict, the better it is for the kids. However, parents can do more than just minimize conflict. When parents show their kids that they can have positive moments with each other (e.g., be excited together about a soccer goal, a good grade, a funny story), it makes their kids’ lives even better. Positive post-divorce co-parenting is not merely the absence of negative

co-parenting; sharing and contributing to holidays and special days (like Father’s Day) lets children feel like there is room for the positive.

4 It Models Kindness

The best parenting advice that exists is to be the person you want your children to be. They are always watching you and when you model kindness and cooperative behavior, they will notice. Helping your child celebrate your co-parent is a great way to model behavior.

You and your co-parent will be at many of your kid’s events over the years — from sporting events and school functions to graduations and weddings. These events are much easier for your children (and their parents) when the relationship between the parents is an amiable one. There might be rough patches, but making goodwill gestures can help ease those difficult times.

5 It Can Shape How Your Kids Experience Divorce

One key point is that if you’re going to keep buying gifts for your co-parent, you need to do it with a generous spirit. If you do it begrudgingly, your children will pick up on that. It also shifts over time; buying gifts isn’t an obligation you are entering into for the rest of your life.

It can be helpful to remember that your divorce will be part of your children’s narrative of their life and you can shape how they experience it. This is a small amount of time and money for a huge relationship payoff. ■

One key point is that if you’re going to keep buying gifts for your co-parent, you need to do it with a generous spirit.



Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao has been in private practice since 2006, seeing children, adolescents, and adults individually and in family and couples therapy. She also provides divorce coach services for people searching for extra support and structure during their divorce process.

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10 Rules for Relationships

(Including Co-Parenting)

It may seem counterintuitive, but successful relationships include divorces – and the same rules for successful marriages also apply to successful divorces and co-parenting relationships.

By Gray Robinson, Relationship Coach



People may not be able to live together in a committed relationship, but if they have children together, they are still in a relationship, regardless of their legal status.

10 Rules for Relationships (Marriage, Divorce, Co-Parenting)

Consider following these general rules, regardless of whether you are getting married, divorced, or establishing a healthy co-parenting relationship.

1 Be Kind. Kindness is a character trait that cannot be over-emphasized, whether you are talking about how you interact with yourself or with others. It is what most people are looking for in another person. You do not have to beat yourself or others up to get your point across. Even more importantly, being kind releases serotonin and oxytocin in your brain and reduces anxiety. While you are staying on good terms with your ex, you may even live longer.

2 Be an Adult. Being an adult and having emotional maturity are key to a successful life. Controlling your emotions and taking responsibility reduces stress and anxiety. Emotionally mature people care about others and try to support them. When you act in an emotionally mature way, you raise the confidence level of your ex-partner that you aren't going to do something to intentionally harm them.

3 Don't Criticize. The fundamental rule for life and divorce is, *"it is better to be happy than right."* Criticizing your (ex) partner is all about being right. There are lots of reasons relationships change, and most of them do not involve blaming the other person. Making the other person wrong won't make you feel any better, either. Criticism is often a projection of guilt. If you are spending a lot of time criticizing your ex, you may have a lot of guilt to deal with. Let that go.

4 Don't Let Negative Emotions Push Love Aside. When I was a divorce lawyer, I would always ask my clients why they married their spouses. Usually, they would say, *"love."* Then I would ask them what happened to the *"love."* Generally, they would say that their partner didn't act as they wanted. Sometimes, my client didn't act as their partner wanted. They could never directly answer my question *"What happened to the love?"* The truth is, love got pushed aside by more negative emotions and they didn't know how to manage that. Getting divorced doesn't mean you don't love them. You get to remember that detail if you want a successful divorce (or marriage).

5 Take Responsibility for Your Own Happiness. Many relationships fail because one or both people don't feel *"good enough."* They constantly demand that their partner make them happy when that is not their job. When their partner can't make them happy, the relationship suffers. It is up to each

of us to take responsibility for our own happiness.

6 Avoid Codependency. The definition of codependence is sacrificing your needs to fulfill the needs of your partner, especially when it concerns happiness. You can't be happy unless your partner is happy, and vice versa. Codependency usually involves an unhealthy one-sided relationship where one person controls the other by manipulation of their emotions. The only way to have a healthy relationship, either married or divorced, is to be in control of your own emotions. You have no responsibility for their emotions, as they have no responsibility for yours.

7 Be Honest. Relationships fail because of a lack of communication due to a lack of honesty. We either hide how we are feeling or we don't want to rock the boat. The same is true for divorces and we don't want our ex to know what we are doing. Open lines of communication are fundamental requirements for good marriages and divorces. If you have children, it is critical to communicate regarding the children. If you don't say what you want, you won't get it.

8 Do Not Gaslight Your Partner! Gaslighting is an abusive technique people use to make their partner think they are crazy. People question their partner's memory, refuse to communicate, trivialize their feelings, divert the conversation by questioning their partner's motives, or stereotype. It is important to know when someone is gaslighting you because it is such an insidious, invasive form of abuse. Keep records, talk to trusted friends, and do not assume any person gaslighting you is well-meaning.

9 Stop Gossiping About and/or Blaming Your Ex. Gossip has a nasty way of proving karma exists. In other words,

what you say may come back to haunt you. The best rule of thumb is to only say positive things about your ex-partner or spouse. It is important to remember the cardinal rule of happiness: *"What other people think about me is none of my business."* The same holds true about what others think of your ex-partner. Nothing good comes from playing the blame game.

10 Keep Records. Whether or not you are headed towards divorce, make sure you have a complete set of your financial records. Among other things, this includes bank statements, insurance policies, investment-related documents, deeds, vehicle titles, and a list of all major assets and liabilities. It is only fair that each partner knows what their community and separate property is from the marriage. Keeping a journal is a very good idea to record both the happy times and the unhappy times. You want to focus on the happy times, but having a record of the unhappy times may serve you in the divorce.

The Same Rules for Marriage Can Also Apply to Divorced Co-Parenting

These are certainly not all of the rules that apply to relationships, whether marriages, divorces, or co-parenting. However, if you follow these rules, you'll find that all kinds of relationships will be much more productive. ■



Gray Robinson, a former divorce attorney, now coaches clients to break through trauma and unhealthy thinking to realize their greatest potential.

He believes that divorce can be the most empowering event of your life. Rather than getting revenge, it is much more important to find security and happiness. www.jamesgrayrobinson.com