



Co-Parenting through Separation and Divorce

Children First

Many children born today have the potential to be "Caught In The Middle" of parental divorce. Research suggests both difficult and promising news: Children from families of divorce may suffer painful consequences, and yet children who are surrounded by support and given the skills and information needed to cope with the situation suffer fewer painful consequences.

How can this be done? Co-parenting is a phrase used to describe divorced or separated parents who are sensitive to their child's distress and who learn techniques that avoid putting children in the middle. Lets face it, many couples find it extremely difficult to divorce amicably. Typically there's potential for a great deal of anger, resentment, disappointment and pain. A parent may mistakenly use children as weapons by controlling the other parent's access to the children or financial support. They may use children as "spies" or trash each other in front of them. All of this puts children at risk and may add to the burden which children of divorce already face. Some possible sources of conflict are:

- Money
- Religious/values education
- Holidays
- Discipline
- Medical issues
- Education and/or career plans
- Recreation (sports, hobbies)
- Parenting styles

When a family is reorganized because of separation or divorce, the parenting responsibilities also need to be reorganized. Remind yourself about **why** it's important to develop a new partnership as parents for your children.

- A cooperative relationship between the two adults concerning parenting issues helps the children in their overall adjustment to the divorce or separation.
- Conflict between former partners is probably inevitable; what is important is how the conflict is managed.
- Destructive strategies for dealing with conflict hurt everyone in the family; constructive strategies create a more positive outcome.



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Take Action

Learning about divorce and the related problems faced by children helps to keep your children from the battles that may occur between divorcing parents. Keep the following suggestions in mind:

1. Plan to take a class such as “Children of Divorce” to learn about how you can support your child and keep him or her from getting caught in the middle. Ask your clerk of court or county extension service office for information about classes in your area.
2. Read and talk with your child. Make a point to look for books that will help you and your child work through a difficult situation and talk about it whenever possible.
3. Set the foundation for a positive co-parenting relationship. Try to think about the following suggestions and come to a common understanding between the adults:
 - Make it clear that you value your child’s time with you and with the other parent.
 - Work out a fair and practical time sharing schedule as soon as possible.
 - Make a serious effort to live up to the terms of the time sharing agreement.
 - Tell the other parent in advance about necessary changes in plans.
 - Prepare your child in a positive way for each upcoming stay with the other parent.
 - Do not conduct custody, visitation, or support discussions when you meet to transfer your child.
 - Listen to your child concerning problems with the other parent, but encourage your child to work out the problems with the other parent directly.
4. Communicate clearly and often with children.

What your child needs to know:

 - The child has not caused the divorce.
 - Neither parent is rejecting the child.
 - The child will still have a family, even though the parents will no longer be married to each other.
 - Although the parents feelings toward each other have changed, the parents’ love for the child will go on forever.
 - The parents will continue to take care of the child and provide for him/her.
 - The parents should try to agree on a reasonable explanation to give the child on why they are getting a divorce. The child needs just enough information to explain the divorce. Too many details may be confusing.
 - As soon as matters are settled, the child needs to know what things will stay the same and what things will change: which parent the child will live with and when he/she will see the other parent, where the child will live and go to school, when the child will see other family members (grandparents, aunts and uncles) and so on.
5. Take care of yourself. Depending on your circumstances, your own emotional and physical energy may be low. Find ways to take care of yourself so you can fully care for your children.

- Work on your problems with the other parent in private.
- Try to be reasonably flexible in “trading off” to accommodate each other’s needs.
- Do not use your child as a confidant, messenger, bill collector, or spy.

Providing Support

Helping your child through the adjustments and difficulties of divorce means being in touch with their feelings of loss, guilt, powerlessness and fear. Review the following list of actions. Revisit this list as your child grows and is able to view the divorce or separation from a new age and stage.

- **Regular Reassurance**

Assure your child that the divorce was not his/her fault.

Reassure your child that he/she is loved by both parents.

Tell your child that it's OK to feel sad about the other parent's leaving or absence.

- **Stability**

Maintain the individual relationship that you have with your child. Encourage the child's other parent to do the same.

Stick to a daily routine with your child, similar at both houses whenever possible.

Make changes in your child's life as slowly as possible, giving your child opportunities to discuss these changes with you and recognizing positive efforts in making these changes.

- **Encouragement**

Encourage your child to play with friends and do other activities that are appropriate for his/her age.

Encourage your child to pursue the same interests he/she had before learning of the divorce or separation.

- **Fairness**

Do not ask your child, either directly or indirectly, which parent she/he loves more.

Be fair in sharing your child with the other parent.

- **Honesty**

Acknowledge that your child may wish to have you and your former partner get back together, but do not encourage or support this wish.

Talk with your child honestly about changes or moves that will affect him/her before they occur.

- **Support**

Support your child's need to visit with the other parent.

Support your child's desire to love both parents. Tell your child that it's still OK to love both of you, even though you're no longer going to be married to each other.

- **Security**

Don't try to use your child as your counselor or your source of emotional support. Seeing parents as needy and dependent on them may make a child feel very insecure. Find an adult who can fulfill those needs for you.

Remind your child that his/her parents will still take care of him/her.

- **Trust**

Show your child that you trust his/her ability to adapt to these changes.

- **Open Circle of Support**

Promote relationships between your child and other safe, healthy and caring adults including extended family, friends and professionals.

Your child feels criticisms of the other parent as if they were criticisms of the child. Each dart thrown at the other parent hits the child first.

The following is a list of destructive remarks that you should not make to your child. If you find yourself saying words like these, stop and think about their impact on your child.

- “If you don’t behave, I’ll send you to live with your father/mother.”
- “You’re lazy/stubborn/bad tempered, just like your mother/father.”
- “I could get along better here by myself.”
- “If you weren’t here, I could . . .”
- “Sometimes I wish I’d been the one to skip out.”
- “Your mother/father put you up to saying that.”
- “Your dad/mom doesn’t love any of us or he/she wouldn’t have left us.”

- “You can’t trust her/him.”
- “He/she was just no good.”
- “If she/he loved you, she/he would send your support checks on time.”
- “If your mother/father is five minutes late again, you’re just not going with her/him.”
- “If you don’t like what I buy you, ask your father/mother to do better.”
- “Who would you really rather be with, Mommy or Daddy?”
- “Now that you’re the little man/little woman of the house . . .”
- “Someday you’ll leave me too, just like your father/mother. Promise me that you’ll never leave.”
- “You’re all I have. You’re the only person I can rely on.”
- “Over my dead body!”

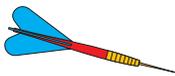
All of these remarks raise fear and anxiety in children.

Are you using your child as a dart board to hurt the other parent?

Do you withhold visitations from the other parent?



Do you use your child to spy on the other parent?



Do you use your child as a pawn or bargaining chip in fighting over family property?



Do you use your child as a go-between to resolve issues with your former partner?



Do you speak negatively and angrily about your former spouse in front of your child?



Do you compare your child with the other parent in a negative way?



Do you argue with the other parent in front of the child?



Do you use your child to pass on information and messages to the other parent?



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