

# CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE

## A Course Outline

### Welcome/Greetings/Introduction

### Housekeeping

- Restrooms
- Sign-In Sheet/Letters
- Packets

### What to Expect

- Ground Rules

### Quiz-Effects of Divorce On Children

### Discussion--Divorced Parenting Styles

- Parallel
- Hostile
- Cooperative
- 5 Stages of Grief

### Video—After the Storm

- Surviving High Conflict Divorce

\*\*\*Break 5-10 Minutes\*\*\*

### Video—Children in the Middle

- Common Situations Parents Unintentionally Place Their Children

### Discussion--Tips for Parenting Apart

- Guidelines for Parenting Apart
- 5 Goals of Divorced Parenting

### Discussion--Effects of Divorce on Children

### Evaluations/Closing

Included in the packet: (1) What Impact could divorce have on my child's life? (2) Quiz (3) Three types of Divorced Parenting Styles (4) 5 Goals of Divorced Parenting (5) Effects of Divorce on Children (6) Children's Understanding of Divorce by Age Group (7) Co-Parenting through Separation & Divorce (8) Tips for Parenting Apart (9) "I" Messages (10) Parent of Divorce Bill of Rights (11) Bill of Rights for Children of Divorce (12) After the Storm Parents Guide (13) Children in the Middle Parents Guidebook (14) HFCC Evaluation

## WHAT TO EXPECT

1. What is the Children in the Middle Course?
  - A course to improve divorced parenting
  - A course to learn how divorce, separation or parenting apart can affect your child/children
  - A course to learn how to minimize your child/children's burden
2. What is the Children in the Middle Course NOT about?
  - It is NOT therapy
  - It is NOT a workshop on divorce law or case strategy
  - It is NOT a forum for you to vent anger and frustration about your ex-spouse or co-parent
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3. What is necessary to learn new skills from this course?
  - Receptivity and motivation to work towards being a better parent
  - Willingness to participate
  - Comfort in acknowledging our strengths and areas of improvement in our parenting
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4. How might this course affect your feelings?
  - Court process and visitation often times leaves people feeling powerless, anxious, worried, confused, and angry
  - Some people have left feeling confident and reassured
5. What are some safe ground rules?
  - **CONFIDENTIALITY:** In order to maintain a safe environment it is imperative to protect each individual's confidentiality. When we leave, the names of other participants, their experiences or situations shall not be discussed with anyone! What is said in this room should stay in this room.
  - **PHYSICAL SAFETY:** Experiencing strong emotions is OK. What is important is that we keep our responses in check. Persons that display intimidating, threatening, or violent behavior (including yelling) may frighten other participants and WILL be asked to leave.
  - **EMOTIONAL SAFETY:** Do excuse yourself if you feel you need to "collect" your thoughts or emotions. You need to remember to take care of yourself and how you feel.
  - **RESPECT:** Everyone is entitled to his/her own feelings, story and experiences. It is important to allow each participant to express what he/she needs to, ask questions when needed and to not be "put-down" or "cut-off". We each have our own values and opinions and during group discussions, we need to respect that other people's values and opinions may be different from our own.

# QUIZ:

## Effects of divorce on Children

1. Preschool children are more affected by the divorce of their parents than are school aged children or adolescents?

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

2. Boys are more than girls affected by their parents' decision to divorce?

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

3. For their emotional well being, it's best for children to live with their mothers in a sole custody arrangement?

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

4. Custody arrangements are the most important factor contributing to children's ability to cope with their parents' divorce?

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

5. Most children recover successfully from the effects of their parents' separation?

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

6. About 75-80 percent of divorced mothers and fathers remarry other people?

True \_\_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_\_

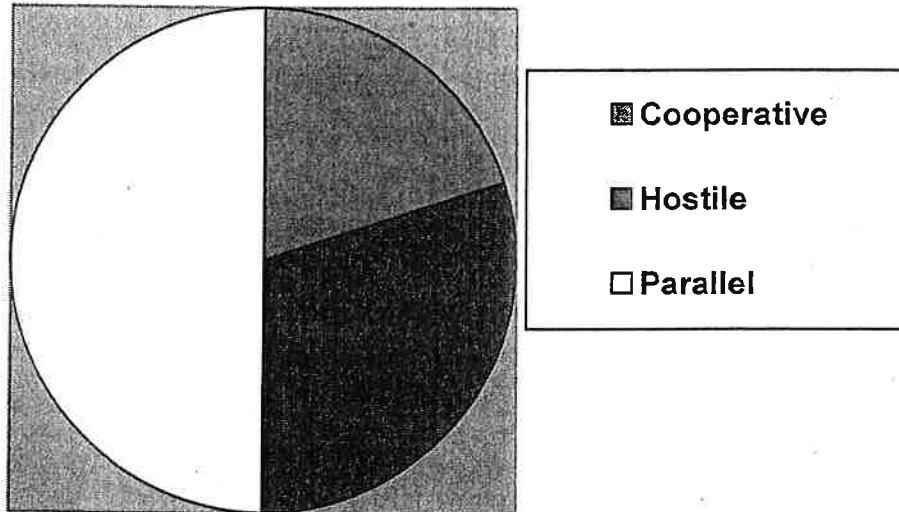
**What impact could divorce have on my child's chances of enjoying a healthy, productive life?**

**“A major national survey of 20,000 adolescents found that the adolescent children of divorced parents did worse than their peers from intact families on such measures of satisfaction with life as happiness, sense of personal control, trust, and friendship.”** Alan C. Acock and K. Hill Kiecolt, “Is it Family Structure or Socioeconomic Status? Family Structure During Adolescence and Adult Adjustment,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 68 (1989), pp. 553-571. This held true even after taking the effects of reduced income into account.

**“In the “Impact of Divorce Project,” a survey of 699 elementary students nationwide conducted by Kent State University in Ohio, children from divorced homes performed more poorly in reading, spelling, and math and repeated a grade more frequently than did children from intact two-parent families.”** Popenoe, *Life Without Father*, p. 57.

**“The divorce of parents also reduces the likelihood that a child will attain a college education. The college attendance rate is about 60 percent lower among children of divorced parents compared with children of intact families.”** Hillevi M. Aro and Ulla K. Palosaari, “Parental Divorce, Adolescence, and Transition to Young Adulthood: A Follow-Up Study,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 1992), pp. 421-429.

## Three Types of Divorced Parenting Styles



### Why Do Some Kids Have More Trouble Coping?

**Parallel Divorce:** Divorcing couples develop a style of parenting where both the mother and father create their own family rituals and lifestyles, with very little overlap. The child has two homes with relatively little interaction between the parents except occasionally and usually to resolve issues regarding visitation. This style can work marginally well at times but can place great strain on the child living between two homes. The child will have to remember what items are at which house, what customs are accepted at which house, and which friends can be seen on which weekend. Transitions between houses can be difficult for children under a parallel parenting arrangement. Because children are often more tuned into feelings than adults, they can be aware of the tension that exists during the overlap period of a transition, and there is little they can do about it.

The most troubling aspect of parallel parenting is what happens when this system is taxed by stress. Stresses on this system could be a difference in parenting philosophy, a difficulty presented by the child such as an illness or school performance problems, or a developmental phase such as entering adolescence. Under these conditions, or when some other load is placed on the system it often deteriorates into a more openly hostile relationship between the parents.

**Hostile Divorce:** Almost all parents show genuine love for their children. Parents would not usually purposefully do any act that would bring harm and suffering to their own offspring. Yet, there are parents who have developed a hostile parenting style. Their interactions with their former spouse are hostile and when they express hostility to their former spouse they feel they that they are defending their child. Often these parents have unresolved feelings toward the other parent. Occasionally, one or both of the parents have significant psychological problems. For any number of reasons, they are unable to let go of their former spouse. They get caught up in a

whirlpool of hostile interactions, in which each steadfastly believes that they are on the defense, and that the other parent is being offensive. Parents with this style of co-parenting are often involved in extensive court battles with their former spouse. *The strain of a hostile parenting relationship can be easily seen in the children, who as a group, are more depressed, have more behavior problems, and perform more poorly in school.*

**Cooperative Divorce:** This is a style of parenting where there is shared decision-making, joint participation in rituals and activities of the child are practiced and both parents flexibly share visitations. This type of divorce is not a type of visitation schedule and cannot occur just because it is in a parenting plan. It is a style that the divorced parents have with regard to how they parent their children. Cooperative parenting can be seen in joint custody but can also occur where one parent has primary custody. It does not relate to the time spent with the child, it makes a statement that the parents are making the effort to put their old, unresolved feelings for each other aside and instead focus on the task of raising their children. *This is the most helpful style of parenting children of divorce because it is the most consistent for the children.*

**Other Risk Factors:** One risk factor is *temperament*. A child's temperament trait is a broad, enduring emotional and behavioral feature. Temperament is the foundation of our personality, and is largely influenced by genetics. There are no good or bad temperaments—each have their own advantages and disadvantages. A child's temperament plays a major role in their ability to cope with stressors, including divorce.

Another risk factor is the *emotional tone of the divorce*. The emotional tone of the divorce is set by things such as: high conflict vs. cooperation between parents; if the divorce was thought through or impulsive; whether the divorce has brought relief vs. both parents are adversely affected; whether the child can understand why the divorce occurred or if it seems arbitrary and how much the child's life will have to change. *What children of divorce really need is for their parents to learn to curb their conflicts and to cooperate together in the task of co-parenting.* In fact, the amount of conflict before, during, and after the divorce is what plays a major role in shaping how the child will feel and it is less about the actual divorce itself.

***Remember: Divorce is a loss and each child will need to work through the stages of grief in their own way and in their own time.*** If a child seems to be "stuck" in the grief process, the parent may need to consider seeking professional help. Childcare providers and teachers can play a big role in assisting parents in assessing whether their child seems to be "stuck". Childcare providers and teachers often have access to the child for long periods of times and away from parental observation. This may be a safe environment for the child to express emotions that feel "unsafe" for the child to express at home. This is especially a concern if the child perceives that they must "care take" either parent or if they have been directed to not express their feelings. A parent may not even be aware of their child's perception around these issues because they may also be "stuck" in the grief process.

### **The Five Stages of Grief**

→ **Denial** → **Bargaining** → **Anger** → **Sadness** → **Acceptance** →

*It is normal to move through these stages in any order and it is also normal to repeat these stages several times.* Children work out their grief mainly through play. If you notice a child going through the motions in their play over and over again repeating the drama of what has happened look for a lack of EMOTION. A lack of EMOTION can be a signal that a child is "stuck".

## TIPS for PARENTING-APART (Parenting After Separation or Divorce)© By DAVID A. GIACALONE, J.D., Mediator

This monograph looks at how to “parent-apart” (to continue parenting after separation and divorce) in a way that is best for your child(ren). First, we look at the goal of creating a “businesslike” co-parent partnership after divorce or separation. Then, we outline specific do’s and don’ts for helping children cope when their parents are no longer a couple.

With divorce or separation (whether you were married or not), you stop being a couple, but your role as co-parents has to continue for your kids’ sake. The courts, the caring professions, and common sense are all in agreement that it is in the best interest of children to have a meaningful relationship with each parent despite a separation or divorce. Only if there is a well-founded reason to fear that a relationship with a parent will jeopardize the physical or emotional welfare of the child, should contact with that parent be restricted, and then only to the extent necessary to safeguard the child’s legitimate interests.

So, ending your relationship as a couple does not and cannot end your relationship as co-parents. You will need to find it within yourself to create and sustain a *businesslike relationship with your “ex”*—one that gets the job done of being co-parents, in order to give your child(ren) the benefits of having two separated but cooperative parents.

When everything in you wants to react in a very unbusinesslike manner to the “other” parent, you will need to remember that your child is the real loser if either of you prevents a quality relationship with both parents from continuing or developing after the household splits. Your child’s welfare is the “carrot” that will hopefully make you put down your “stick”—that is, make you choose to build a businesslike partnership with the other parent or your child(ren), rather than choosing to battle or banish that person. The inevitable thought that “You don’t deserve to see these kids!” must be replaced with “These kids deserve to see you.” And the urge to say “You never wanted to spend time with them before” needs an edit to “Thanks for giving the kids more of your time now when they need it.”

Words and tone do count. You might start by using a neutral term to replace the rather negative sounding “ex” in referring to the other parent of your child(ren). I like the acronym COPE, which stands for Child(ren)’s Other Parent—Estranged. Calling a separated co-parent your COPE just might help each estranged parent remember the goal of being partners in parenting—coping together in the job of co-parenting after you stop being a couple.

Building a co-parent partnership takes work, but not miracles. Plenty of people put up with an awkward relationship in a business situation in order to achieve goals a lot less important than the emotional welfare of their children. Many partnerships, whether of lawyers, doctors or even comedy duos are successful although the partners are far from being friends. For the sake of (and especially in front of) the clients, shareholders, or the public, hostile partners can and do behave with civility and cooperation to reach their common goal. Can’t you do that for your children?

The loss of full control over your child that is implicit in a parent partnership is not so hard to take when you understand it is needed to achieve a bigger goal. In fact, abandoning the zero-sum game that says, “I lose whenever you win” allow parents to see that they both win when the children win by having two involved parents. Pretty soon you might even see that sharing parenting time and responsibility has rewards for you, too—from more time for yourself (like the bliss of grocery shopping alone) to less pressure to make and take full responsibility for all decisions. So, don’t be too skeptical about achieving the state of *polite civility and practical cooperation* called for in a “businesslike” co-parenting relationship. People less reasonable than you have made parenting-apart relationships work.

Attorney and psychologist Harriet Whitman Lee, of Family Law Counseling Services, Berkely, Calif., formulated the following guidelines to help keep your parenting partnership on the track to success. If you disagree with any of the concepts, ask yourself if it is the ex-lover or the co-parent in you that is disagreeing—that is, whether you’re looking at it from the perspective of your own unsuccessful relationship with the other person or from that of our child(ren)’s life-long relationship with him or her.

## Guidelines for a Parenting-Apart Partnership

- A. **Make a conscious decision to create a successful partnership** to achieve your mutual parenting goals.
- B. **Be business-like with your Children's Other Parent (your COPE).** Test all of your behavior against this standard: Was I businesslike? Test your COPE's behavior by the same standard, not by how you feel.
- C. **Respect your child(ren)'s relationship with your COPE.**
- D. **Make appointments** to talk about business. Except for emergencies, call only during business hours or during agreed upon times; always ask if the timing is convenient and, if it isn't, make an appointment for a time that is.
- E. **Be polite.** Don't use bad language or name call. If you feel yourself getting unbusinesslike, say so and agree to talk at another time.
- F. **Give the benefit of the doubt.** Do not assume anything about your COPE's reasons or decisions based on past experience.
- G. **Do not expect approval** (get your needs fulfilled elsewhere), but do acknowledge positive words or deeds of your partner.
- H. **Respect your COPE's privacy.** Do not discuss matters irrelevant to the parenting business unless your partner specifically agrees to do so. Don't seek to know the details of his or her life or intrude on his or her territory.
- I. **Make all agreements explicit and communicate directly.** Follow up with written confirmation when possible (or make your own written memorandum). Be clear and complete in your communications (e.g. time, place; who supplies what).
- J. **Keep agreements.** Do not break appointments. If you can't promise something, make it clear and explain why you can't.
- K. **Consult with your partner and the children** so that the best, most workable decision can be made. Do not make unilateral decisions on issues that should include your partner.
- L. **Don't insist on what does not work.** Be flexible; commit yourself as much as you are able to and experiment to see what does work.
- M. **Above all, cultivate good will** in the partnership. Keep in mind always the importance of the investment and the expected returns.

Achieving the above goals will take real work. An occasional misstep won't mean bad faith, just that you or your COPE is human. Staying angry wastes too much time and energy and hurts everyone. Cooperating in the business of parenting will make a better post-separation life for your children and yourself.

Of course, nothing we do will prevent children from hurting when their parents split up. But, the experts all agree that the way you split—that is, the level of hostility you create and maintain and the kind of relationship each child is allowed to have with each parent—will greatly determine the extent of the damage to the children of "broken families." Experience with millions of the children of divorce has yielded a wealth of information about parenting-apart in a manner that is best for your children.

As discussed above, the most successful way to parent-apart is to form a business-like partnership with your COPE (your Child's Other Parent-Estranged). There are no easy rules on how to succeed in this awkward new relationship. Unfortunately, children experiencing the break-up of their family unit don't have the time to



wait for their parents' wounds to heal fully and scars to fade. More than ever, they need the reassurance that both parents love them and are really there for them; and they need to know what to expect from each parent and that it is okay to love each parent.

No matter what their ages, children have certain fundamental needs from the time their parents first separate:

- (a) Children need to be *reassured* that both parents love them and will continue to be part of their lives and that it is okay to love both parents; and the split is not their fault and that nothing they can do will change their parents' decision.
- (b) Children greatly need a significant relationship, with as much certainty and routine as possible, with the absent or non-custodial parent. This is true no matter the quality of their relationship with the non-custodial parent prior to the breakup.
- (c) Children need freedom from hearing one parent demean or badmouth the other. It hurts a child greatly to hear on beloved parent say or suggest that the other beloved parents are evil or flawed.
- (d) Children need information, given in a panic-free, assured tone, about what is happening, who will take care of them, and what to expect. And they need reassurances that the financial and emotional setbacks will be overcome and things will settle down within the readjusted family. You are not doing your children a favor by avoiding these topics in order to "spare" them from the reality of your split. You will, however, help them greatly if you stay composed and act optimistic—they do not need a panicked captain at a time their ship hits an iceberg.
- (e) Children need to have their feelings (e.g. anger, anxiety, sadness, and confusion) and those of their parents acknowledged. And they need to learn and see the very important lesson that life goes on, and can still be filled with love and joys, despite setbacks.
- (f) Children need to have clear evidence that the parents are still in charge and that attempts to manipulate the parents will not be accepted. Some parents, out of guilt or compassion, try to make up for the bad aspects of a divorce by relaxing rules, weakening discipline, eliminating chores, or overindulging in gifts. Children do better, however, if normal routines and expectations are continued. No matter what they say or do, children are too smart to equate permissiveness with love and compassion.
- (g) Children need to be allowed to get on with being kids it is not their job to try to solve their parents' problems or to care for hurting parents. Their job is to do kid-things: play, grow, make friends, enjoy sports and hobbies while being active and responsible students, as well as, helping around the house.

Of course, these guidelines and principles can and should be followed after the initial stages of a parental break-up. Children need to know that, though their family may be restructured, their needs will be taken care of and their need to love both parents will be honored.

On a day-to-day basis, the children of divorced or separated parents must be kept out of the middle of their parents' problems and disputes. The Children in the Middle program developed by psychologists at the non-profit Center for Divorce Education in Athens, Ohio, highlights four situations that are particularly distressing for kids and should be avoided by separated parents:

- **Carrying Messages Between Parents.** Parents must take the responsibility to talk directly with each other, especially if the topic is likely to anger the other parent or catch the child between loyalties and desires. It is unfair to make your child carry messages to your "ex" because you find it too awkward or aggravating to do so yourself. It is also poor parenting to show by example to your child that you can resolve a problem with another person by not communicating or to suggest that the other parent is such a monster that you cannot speak or be civil with each other.
- **Dealing with Money Issues.** Who will pay for what and how available money should be spent are adult issues that the parents must discuss directly. Do not put your child(ren) in the middle of your child support disputes.

- ***Criticisms of the Other Parent.*** Even if you are sure you're right, try to avoid criticizing your COPE to or around the kids, and try to find good things to say about the other parent. It hurts a child very much to hear one loved parent criticize the other loved parent.
- ***Quizzing Children About the Other Parent.*** It is inappropriate to ask children about the personal and private matters of their other parent—such as finances or dating. You can, of course, show a natural interest in what your kids do in your COPE's home, but do not turn them into spies reporting on the shortcomings of their other parent. The line is hard to define, but in your heart you can feel the difference between healthy interest in your kids and negative snooping.

Children in the Middle also points out three other practices by separated parents that kids say are especially distressing: (a) Playing one child off against the other, and punishing a child who seems to care more about the other parent, (b) complaining to your child about how lonely you are after the separation—this makes a child feel guilty and sad and want to "parent" you; and (c) threatening to cut off contact with the children if the other parent doesn't do or stop doing something—the kids hear these threats and fear more loss in their lives. Such conduct hurts your kids and must not be continued.

The greatest gift we can give the children of divorced or separated parents is the freedom to love both parents. Parenting-apart is not easy. But it can be done successfully if you use the standard of businesslike conduct and cooperation—and, if you respect your kids' relationship with their other parent.

*[David A Giacalone, JD, is the director of Project PAX (The Parenting-Apart eXchange) in Scotia, NY. He has served as Law Guardian for hundreds of children whose parents live apart, and has been a divorce mediator since 1987. He created and presents the divorce education seminar, esp/PAX-education for separated parents.]*