

Co-Parenting through Separation and Divorce

Making It Work

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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. Let's 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. Parents may use children as weapons by controlling the other person'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 of the typical 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 child/ren:

1. Children benefit from having a positive and supportive relationship with both parents.
2. Cooperative parenting reduces the levels of stress that echo throughout the entire family.
3. The absence of communication between parents or the presence of conflicting communication hurts the child if he or she is placed in the middle.

One of the most difficult issues for parents who share responsibilities for children is the issue of visitation. The following guidelines are meant to give you several ideas to work from. Each family must find what works best for them while avoiding too much pressure being put on the children.

General Guidelines

The guidelines that follow are examples of constructive parenting goals that promote the well being of the children by helping them grow into healthy, happy, whole people.

- Both parents should encourage visitation to help their children grow and develop in a positive way.
- Children need to know that it is OK to love **both** parents.
- In general, parents should try to act respectfully toward each other, at least for the sake of the children.
- Each parent should show respect for the other's views concerning how to raise the children by trying, where possible, to be consistent. For example, if one parent is strongly opposed to having toy guns for small children, the other should take this view into account when buying toys.
- Each parent is entitled to know the whereabouts of the children during visitations, as well as whom the children are with (such as a babysitter or friend), if they are not with the other parent.
- The parents should discuss and try to agree on the religious education of the children, as well as on who is responsible for seeing that the children attend religious instruction.
- It is vitally important that each parent let the other know his/her current address and home and work phone numbers.
- Both parents should realize that visitation schedules might change as children grow older and have different needs.

Visitation DO's

1. Be as flexible as possible about visitation schedules.

- Give the other parent as much advance notice of changes in visitation as possible.
- Remember to give the other parent your vacation schedule in advance and, where possible, provide your itinerary.
- Remember that your children may have plans that could affect your visitation schedule.
- Respect their need for flexibility.

2. Make visitations a normal part of life.

- Find activities that give you and your children opportunities to build your relationship, but also allow some time to just "hang out" together.
- Provide a balance of fun and responsibility for your children.
- Encourage some visitations that include grandparents and extended family.
- Make sure that your children have places that belong to them—even if it's just a section of a room in your home so it can be their home too.
- Help your children get to know others in the neighborhood, so that they can have friends in both homes.
- Keep to a routine and a schedule in preparing your children for visitations.
- Have a checklist of items that children need to bring/take (clothing, toys, etc.). If the children are old enough, they can help pack or can pack independently.
- Sometimes, if it's appropriate, allow your children to bring friends along.
- On occasion, separate your children, so that you can have individual time with each other.

3. Show respect for your former partner and concern for your children.

- Show up on time.
- Inform them in advance if a new person/partner (for example new babysitter, new partner) will be part of the visit.
- Share changes in address, telephone numbers, jobs, etc.

Visitation DON'TS

Some parents use visitations to achieve destructive goals. **Destructive goals** are those that are based on one parent seeking to hurt the other parent, to disrupt his or her life, to inflict revenge for past or present hurts. To achieve that goal, the parent may use destructive strategies. This can create an even more hostile relationship with the former spouse and can seriously damage the relationship between the children and one or both parents. Destructive strategies can be deeply hurtful to the children caught in the middle and must be avoided. To avoid destructive strategies:

1. **Don't refuse to communicate with your former partner.**
 - Don't use your children as messengers on divorce-related issues, such as child support. The adults should discuss those issues only.
 - Don't make your children responsible for making, canceling, or changing visitation plans. Those are adult responsibilities.
 - Don't use your children to spy on your former spouse.
 - Don't use drop-off and pick-up times as opportunities to fight with the other parent. Deal with important issues in a separate meeting or telephone call, when your children cannot

2. **Don't try to disrupt your children's relationship with the other parent.**
 - Don't try to make your children feel guilty about spending time with the other parent.
 - Don't use the visitation as rewards for good behavior by your children, and don't withhold visitation as punishment for poor behavior.
 - Don't tell your children that you'll feel lonely and sad if they visit the other parent.
 - Don't withhold visitations to punish your former spouse for past wrongs or to get even for missed child-support payments. Withholding visitations will punish your children, who are not guilty.
 - Don't withhold visitations because you feel your former spouse doesn't "deserve" to see the children. Except in the case where a parent is a genuine threat to the children, adults and children need and deserve to see each other.
 - Don't use false accusations of abuse to justify withholding visitations.
 - Try not to let activities (sports, hobbies, etc.) interfere with time your children need to spend with the other parent. Perhaps the other parent can sometimes transport the children to those activities and/or join with them.
 - Don't pressure your children about clothes, toys, and other items left at the other parent's home. The children need to feel they belong in both homes.
 - Don't falsely claim that your children are sick to justify withholding visitations.
 - Don't withhold phone calls to your children from the other parent.
 - Don't refer to the other parent's new romantic partner in a derogatory way.

3. **Don't allow your anger against your partner affect your relationship with your children.**
 - Don't hurt your children by failing to show up for visitations or by being late.

4. **Don't try to spoil your children or try to "buy" their loyalty or love.**
 - Don't let your children blackmail you by refusing to visit unless you buy the something.
 - Don't try to bribe your children.
 - Don't feel that you have to be a "buddy" to your children in order for visitations to be successful. Your children need you to be a parent.
 - Don't feel you have to fill every minute of a visit with activities. Allow some "down time" for routine activities together, such as cooking or doing laundry, or time just to be quiet together.

References:

Malroy, M, Malley, C., Sabatelli, R., & Waldron, R. (1995). *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting*. University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System and School of Family Studies. Excerpts used with permission of authors.

Gordon, D. (1994). *Children In The Middle*. Center for Divorce Education: Athens, Ohio.

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What Can Parents Do?

- Repeatedly tell children that they are not responsible for the divorce.
- Reassure children of how their needs will be met and of who will take care of them.
- Talk with children about their thoughts and feelings; be sensitive to children's fears.
- Plan a schedule of time for children to spend with their other parent. Be supportive of children's ongoing relationship with the other parent.
- Read books together about children and divorce (see list at end of guide).
- Gently, and matter-of-factly, remind children that the divorce is final and that parents will not get back together again.

What Can Providers & Educators Do?

- Discipline using logical consequences. Limit use of "time-out".
- Guide each child by letting him or her know when behavior is acceptable. Verbally recognize positive behavior.
- Interact with the child. Allow time for children to share their thoughts. Plan time for children to play alone, in small groups, and in large groups.
- Involve children as helpers. Be patient, as it may take longer to complete the task when the child is helping you.
- Provide space for the child's things while they are in your care.
- Watch for post-traumatic play. Children reenact the traumatic events through their play. This is different from regular play because they don't seem to show any pleasure or joy in the play. Instead, they just keep acting out the even over and over.
- Invite both parents to parent teacher conferences, open houses and special events. Keep both parents informed in person, by mail or phone as much as possible.
- Don't assume that a parent will pass on a discussion between you and them to the other parent.

Preteens & Adolescents

Understandings

- Understand what divorce means but may have difficulty accepting the reality of the changes it brings to their family.
- Although thinking at a more complex level, still may blame themselves for the divorce.

Feelings

- May feel abandoned by the parent who moves out of the house.
- May withdraw from long-time friends and favorite activities.
- May act out in uncharacteristic ways (start using bad language, become aggressive or rebellious).
- May feel angry and unsure about their own beliefs concerning love, marriage, and family.

Domestic Violence and Children

The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Definition of Domestic Violence: A pattern of coercive behavior which may include physical and sexual violence, threats, insults and economic deprivation which is aimed at gaining and then maintaining power and control over the body, mind, lifestyle and behavior of a partner.

- Witnessing Domestic Violence is the single best predictor of juvenile delinquency.
- The rate of partner violence is 1000% higher for men who observed domestic violence in childhood.

Children are faced with the overwhelming task of finding:

- A sense of trust with the untrustworthy
- Safety in a situation which is unsafe
- Control in a terrifying and unpredictable environment.

Children Living in Violent Households

WAYS OF BEING DRAWN IN

EFFECTS OF ABUSE

0-1 YEAR OLDS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seeing it• Hearing it• Being awakened by it• Being injured by it• Being ripped from mother's arms• Having toys broken• Being born prematurely• Being hit while in mom's arms• Being thrown | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical injury• Death• Fright• Being traumatized by it• Sleep disturbances• Eating disturbances• Being colicky or sick• Insecurity because of being cared for by a traumatized mom• Not responsive or cuddly |
|--|---|

2-4 YEAR OLDS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seeing it• Hearing it• Trying to stop altercation• Becoming abused themselves• Being used as a physical weapon against the victim• Being interrogated by perpetrator about victims activities• Being held hostage by perpetrator | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acting out violently• Withdrawal• Trouble with other kids• Delayed toileting• Eating problems• Nervous, jumpy• Sleep problems• Insecurity, fear and Depression |
|--|---|

Social

- Isolation from friends and relatives.
- Stormy relationships.
- Difficulty in trusting, especially adults.
- Poor anger management and problem solving skills.
- Excessive social involvement to avoid home.
- Passivity with peers or bullying.
- Engaged in exploitative relationships as perpetrator or victim.

Physical

- Somatic complaints, headaches and stomachaches.
- Nervous, anxious, short attention span.
- Tired and lethargic.
- Frequently ill.
- Poor personal hygiene.
- Regression in development.
- High risk play.
- Self abuse.

Nurturing children from abusive homes can bring healing to their lives. In giving needed love and care to children, it is important for a parent to reflect these essentials:

- **Trust and Respect**
Acknowledge children's right to have their own feelings, friends, activities and opinions. Promote independence, allow for privacy and respect their feelings for the other parent. Believe in them.
- **Provide Emotional Security**
Talk and act so children feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves. Be gentle. Be dependable.
- **Provide Physical Security**
Provide healthy food, safe shelter and appropriate clothing. Teach personal hygiene and nutrition. Monitor safety. Maintain a family routine. Attend to wounds.
- **Provide Discipline**
Be consistent; ensure that rules are appropriate to age and development of the child. Be clear about limits and expectations. Use discipline to give instruction, not to punish.
- **Give Time**
Participate in your children's lives, in their activities, school, sports, special events, celebrations and friends. Include your children in your activities. Reveal who you are to your children.
- **Encourage and Support**
Be affirming. Encourage children to follow their interests. Let children disagree with you. Recognize improvement. Teach new skills. Let them make mistakes.
- **Give Affection**
Express verbal and physical affection. Be affectionate when your children are physically or emotionally hurt.
- **Care for Yourself**
Give yourself personal time. Keep yourself healthy. Maintain friendships. Accept love.

Child Victim/Witness of Domestic Violence

Age-specific indicators

Infants

- Basic need for attachment is disrupted.
- Routines around feeding/sleeping are disturbed.
- Injuries while "caught in the crossfire".
- Irritability or inconsolable crying.
- Frequent illness.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Diarrhea.
- Developmental delays.
- Lack of responsiveness.

Preschool

- Somatic or psychosomatic complaints.
- Regression.
- Irritability.
- Fearful of being alone.
- Extreme separation anxiety.
- Developmental delays.
- Sympathetic toward mother.

Elementary Age

- Vacillate between being eager to please and being hostile.
- Verbal about home life.
- Developmental delays.
- Externalized behavior problems.
- Inadequate social skill development.
- Gender role modeling creates conflict/confusion.

Preadolescence

- Behavior problems become more serious.
- Increased internalized behavior difficulties: depression, isolation, withdrawal.
- Emotional difficulties: shame, fear, confusion, rage.
- Poor social skills.
- Developmental delays.
- Protection of mother, sees her as "weak".
- Guarded/secretive about family.

Adolescence

- Internalized and externalized behavior problems can become extreme and dangerous: drug/alcohol, truancy, gangs, sexual acting out, pregnancy, runaway, suicidal.
- Dating relationships may reflect violence learned or witnessed in the home.

5 Goals of Divorced Parenting

1. **Keep your promises.** Your kids are depending on you, and kept promises are an important way you can create stability during a time of uncertainty. Each broken promise, no matter how small, reduces their trust in you a little bit, and can really erode over time. So, think before you speak, and do everything you can to keep your word.
2. **Show your kids that you'll be okay.** For them to feel confident and at peace, they have to see that you are. If it's obvious that you're devastated, they'll be insecure. That doesn't mean you never show weaknesses; honesty is critical. But show them in words and actions that you can make it through the tough times.
3. **Support their other parent.** Impossible, you say? It's a vital element of any healthy family—intact or otherwise. Recognize that cutting the other parent down lowers you in the long run. Help them honor their other parent. Work out disagreements in private.
4. **Be the best parent you can be.** That's all you can control anyway. They need patience and understanding, fair limits, balance and consistency from you, so don't try to counteract the other parent's parenting style. It brings more harm than good.
5. **Be involved for the long haul.** It sounds obvious, but it's amazing how many divorced parents get sidetracked by a new job, a different city, or a new relationship—maybe with a new family—and lose track of the sincere commitments they have made to their children. Being a positive influence in your kids' lives means being there when they need you, for small and big things.

Don't let your motivation as a parent fall off through the years because of frustration or the tedium of routing. You are important to your kids even if they don't always show it.

Parent of Divorce
Bill of
RIGHTS

1. A PARENT has the right to love and nurture one's child without harassment from the other parent.
2. A PARENT has the right to receive respect and courtesy and the obligation to show respect and courtesy.
3. A PARENT has the right to attend and participate in a child's special activities.
4. A PARENT has the right to information regarding a child's physical, mental and emotional health.
5. A PARENT has the right during parenting time to follow one's own standards, beliefs and style of child rearing without interference from the other parent.
6. A PARENT has the right to a separate and private life.



DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROJECT

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