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### The Co-parenting Relationship

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

By Darlene Weyburne, BCD, CSW, ACSW

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

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

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

### Developing respect

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

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

### Supporting your children's relationship with your ex

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

Support your children in loving and building a relationship with the other parent. Never start a sentence with "If your father/mother really loved you..." Don't allow your feelings of being betrayed to interfere with your support of your children's need to love and be loved by your former partner. Just as you're able to love a new baby without loving your other children less, your children can love more than one parent. If your child

phones you while he or she is with the other parent, don't ask, "Do you miss me?" or, "Do you want to come home?" As painful as it may be for you, remember that your children are home when they're with your ex. They'll develop healthier relationships if they don't have to choose between loving you and loving their other parent. "Exercise 1: How Do We Show Love?" (right) will help you communicate to your children that it is okay to love both parents.

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

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

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

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

### Communicating about important issues

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

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

Communicate to your children's teachers and school counselors that you have set up this system, and encourage them to place items directly in the folder. The cooperative effort between you, the other parent, and the school can enhance your children's academic achievement and emotional adjustment. Don't include any notes to the other parent from you. If your children are having problems at school, communicate this to the other parent by phone, through the mail, or in person. "Exercise 2: Creating a School Folder" (below, right) will help you compose a letter to school and organize a school folder.

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

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

"When my teacher said, 'Make sure your parents come to the open house,' it was easy for the other kids," says Bonita, aged 15. "They just had to remember to tell their parents about it. I had to decide which parent to invite and what excuse I was going to make up to explain why the other parent wasn't there." Knowing that both parents will attend school functions will help your children feel more normal. (If you live in a distant city, of course, your children won't expect you to turn up at every event. But make sure to attend the big ones: graduation, wedding, etc.) Don't use these events to discuss problems with the other parent. It's

humiliating for your children to see you argue in public. If avoiding an argument with the other parent is too difficult or if it's too painful to sit together, sit in another area of the auditorium or classroom. Remember that these events are celebrations of your children's achievements. Your children deserve the privilege of having both parents involved.

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

### Child support

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

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

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

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

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

### Mediation & co-parenting

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

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

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

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

This article has been edited and excerpted from **What To Tell the Kids about Your Divorce** by Darlene Weyburne, BCD, CSW, ACSW (New Harbinger Publications, \$13.95US). Offering creative exercises and common-sense advice, this comprehensive guide will assist you to move beyond your own anger so you can help your kids cope with your divorce. Available at better bookstores, or call (800) 748-6273, or visit [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com) to order.