

COOPERATIVE PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE

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Family relationships do not disappear when a marriage ends in separation or divorce. Divorcing parents will continue to communicate with their former spouses in matters of child rearing. The ability of parents to interact with each other greatly impacts on the child's development. Unrelenting parental conflict is the single most common cause of poor adjustment in children following a divorce. Conflict places a greater strain on a child's development than any other single factor in divorce. Thus, it is imperative that divorcing parents learn to maintain their role as parents separate from their role as a former spouse.

More often than not, children are the innocent casualties of divorce. Unfortunately children are often put in the middle of their parents' negative interactions and frequently become messengers, scapegoats, manipulators, spies, and/or parentified children. When divorcing parents are at war with each other - verbally or physically, via phone calls or during an exchange at visitation - children generally become lost in the crossfire. In addition, parental warfare forces children into a position to which there is no acceptable solution. Children must either side with one parent and risk losing the other parent, or they must position themselves between their parents. Losing a parent is the most painful and agonizing alternative for these children. This, ongoing parental conflict denies children permission to love both parents.

Those children who observe intense hostility between their parents are not only caught in loyalty binds, but they are at high risk for future emotional and behavioral consequences. Parental conflict interferes with responsible parenting necessary for healthy psychological development. Professionals maintain that conflict alters the nature of the parent-child relationship, threatens the parent's protective role, frightens children, leads to anxiety and distress and influences the child's identity formation. Countless children live in an atmosphere of tension, fear, uneasy alliances, and feelings of abandonment. Moreover, it leaves children vulnerable to future problems with adult relationships.

Children of parents who remain in a hostile relationship suffer greatly and languish just as much in sole custody as in joint custody arrangements. Current research (Garrity, C.B. & Baris, M.S., 1994) indicates that joint legal custody alone does not guarantee children a reduction of parental hostility. Contrary to popular belief, joint custody is not synonymous with a cooperative parenting relationship. The structure of the family doesn't define the quality of parenting, people do. A child's adjustment to a divorce is determined by how well divorcing parents share the joint responsibility of raising their children in a cooperative atmosphere. Regardless of the family structure, children need parents who are dedicated to their well-being, who support each other, and who separate their own personal problems and conflicts from their role as parents. One home or two, children benefit most from two parents who love, nurture, and shield them from parental conflict.

Fortunately, parental conflict is one aspect of the divorce which parents have the most control. Although it takes time and effort by both parents to construct a co-parenting arrangement, its time has come. Once it is recognized that divorcing parents are at high risk of remaining in conflict, parents can be encouraged to become involved in programs that reduce the child's exposure to parental warfare. Cooperative Parenting, a project of Family Solutions, is a psychotherapeutic program designed to reduce the major risk factor that influences a child's post divorce adjustment: parental conflict. By improving the quality of communication, respect, cooperation, and a parent's empathetic understanding of their child's needs, Cooperative Parenting also increases the likelihood that both parents will remain active in their child's life.

DO:

1. Reassure the children that the divorce was not their fault.
2. Separate your parenting relationship from your marital relationship.
3. Respect your former spouse's competence as a parent rather than focus on flaws or incompetence.
4. Allow your children to love both parents.
5. Divide parenting time so that the children feel they still have two parents.
6. Communicate about the children directly with your former spouse.
7. Recognize that cooperative parenting is forever.
8. Establish and maintain rules, routines, and responsibilities in both households.
9. Continually express your love and affection toward your children.
10. Shield your children from parental conflict.

DON'T:

1. Communicate with your former spouse through your children.
2. Put your child in an adult role.
3. Fight or argue in front of your children.
4. Make negative comments about your former spouse in front of your children or when they might overhear you.
5. Make negative facial expressions when speaking about your former spouse in front of your children.
6. Ask your child to "spy" on the other parent.
7. Discuss child support with your children or comment about it in their presence.
8. Change plans capriciously.
9. Force your children to side with one parent over the other parent.
10. Threatens to withhold visitation.

Since the effects of divorce on children can be long-lasting the goal of divorcing couples should be to establish and maintain a cooperative relationship as co-parents. Regardless of whether parents have been given sole or joint custody, establishing a cooperative atmosphere between separate family households can prevent and decrease the severity of emotional or behavioral problems in children. If parental conflict is not treated, serious psychological difficulties in children are likely to continue into adulthood. Children who are raised in a cooperative atmosphere after their parents' divorce are more likely to cope successfully and develop a healthy attitude toward relationships.