

# **SKILLS FOR COOPERATIVE PARENTING POST-DIVORCE**

**HUMPHREY CLINIC for Individual, Couple and Family  
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## **SKILLS FOR COOPERATIVE PARENTING**

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## **GROUND RULES**

Anything shared in this group should be considered CONFIDENTIAL.

This means that personal information spoken about in this group should not be shared outside the group.

There are some important exceptions to the confidentiality rule:

- The law requires that your Facilitator report any suspected abuse or neglect of children or vulnerable adults (elders, persons with disabilities) to the State of Connecticut for investigation.
- Facilitators are also mandated to provide support and protection if any group participant indicates that they may harm themselves or someone else. This may require notifying any contact (police, hospital, potential victim) required to ensure safety.

Everyone has valuable ideas and comments to share and is encouraged to listen and speak respectfully, only for herself or himself.

Only one person should speak at a time.

Everyone is encouraged to share their honest feelings, but everyone also has a right to privacy. No one will be forced to speak.

Facilitators may provide information or resources, but cannot provide legal advice or therapy in this workshop.

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*I hope to learn something about:*

# **I. DIVORCE: A CHANGE PROCESS**

## **RESTRUCTURING THE FAMILY**

- Divorce does not “end” a family; it re-organizes a family
- Families are networks with various members. After the divorce, the members still interact with one another, but have separate households
- The family becomes “binuclear,” meaning with two “centers.”
  - Families also are part of a bigger picture. They can be influenced by: o Their immediate environment (neighborhood, work, place of worship) o Indirect influences (media, school system, other parent’s job) o Societal influences (cultural values, government policies, the economy)

## **INTRODUCTIONS**

- 1) How long have you been separated?
- 2) When was the moving out?
- 3) Do your children know? (handout if they don’t)
- 4) How did you tell them?
- 5) What have their reactions been?
- 6) Have you seen any changes over time?
- 7) Do you still have contact with your co-parent’s family?
- 8) Have you developed any new traditions?

## CHANGING THE RELATIONSHIP

### I. DIVORCE: A CHANGE PROCESS

#### REVISION:

As you go through a divorce, it can be helpful to understand some aspects of how partnerships change. Many people go through a process of “revision” – that is, they look back at their partnership and remember all the things that were bad about the relationship. They remember only things they dislike about their ex-partner and focus on all the ways the other person failed them. This is a normal and sometimes even helpful process. It can help each person “get over” the other and end a relationship that isn’t working. Both partners often go through this, no matter who initiated the divorce. However, some people get stuck there, only remembering the ways the partner failed in the relationship. It’s important to remember during this time that being a “lousy” partner is not the same thing as being a “lousy” mother or father.

#### TIMING:

Some relationships break up suddenly and with no warning. In other relationships, partners may think or talk about breaking up long before it happens. Sometimes one partner has been thinking about breaking up for a lot longer than the other. One thing is for sure in all divorces; everyone deals with it at their own pace.

This difference in timing is the cause of some tension in the family.

PARTNER A ----->

PARTNER B ----->

CHILD A ----->

#### Notes:

*Emery, Robert, PhD (2006). The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing With The Emotions So You And Your Children Can Thrive, New York, NY: Penguin Group.USA, Inc.*

## STAGES

### I. DIVORCE: A CHANGE PROCESS

In their own timing:

- Each partner thinks about relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction
- Each partner confronts relationship dissatisfaction for themselves and with each other
- Each partner creates a story about the end of the relationship for themselves, their children, and the world around them
- Each partner communicates their story to their children and the world around them

The “nuclear” and extended family begins to re-organize into a new way of relating to each other as the parents separate. A “bi-nuclear” family forms, organizing around two separate households.

### “ROLE STRAIN”

Your role in your family and as a parent may remain somewhat the same as you divorce, or may change quite a bit. Children often transition more quickly when routines and relationships remain consistent before, during and after the divorce. However, this may not be possible. Family restructuring sometimes requires parents to take on roles that used to belong to the other parent (homework help, cooking, transportation). Parents may also want to take on a bigger role with their child than they had during the marriage. Even positive changes may temporarily create stress as parents and children adapt to new routines and expectations. For example, a parent who used to leave discipline up to their partner, now may want to have a say about whether it is acceptable for their child to have a sleepover at a friend’s house, or about how sibling fighting should be handled when they didn’t before. A parent who formerly left activities up to their partner may now want to attend their child’s soccer games, or spend time with them instead of taking them to their dance class during visit time.

Duck’s model for relationship dissolution, Duck, S.W. (2011) Rethinking relationships, pp. 171-192. Duck S. W., ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

# INDICATORS OF ADJUSTMENT

## I. DIVORCE: A CHANGE PROCESS

### How will you know if you've adjusted, or adapted to the end of the relationship?

For adults, adjustment involves three basic tasks. The first task is to accept the fact of the divorce- to accept the idea that the relationship has ended. The second task is to work out a balance between being a single person and being a parent. The third task is to begin to look toward the future with hope, not toward the past with sadness and disappointment. Let's look at where you are on the following indicators of adjustment:

#### ACCEPTANCE

- Accepting that the marriage/romantic relationship has ended.
- Making peace through cooperative co-parenting.
- Recognizing your own contributions to the ending of the relationship.

I am:

←----->

Not at all accepting   Somewhat accepting   Accepting

#### ESTABLISHING FUTURE-ORIENTED GOALS

- Shifting thoughts and speech from "We" to "I"
- Establishing a new lifestyle for you and your family

I:

←----->

Still grieve past goals   Sometimes think about future goals   Mostly focus on future goals

## INDICATORS OF ADJUSTMENT

### I. DIVORCE: A CHANGE PROCESS

#### WORKING OUT A GOOD BALANCE BETWEEN BEING SINGLE AND BEING A SINGLE PARENT

- Developing self-esteem and skills as a single-parent and a single person
- Re-establishing or developing new sources of support and friendship as an individual and as a parent
- Feeling competent as a parent and co-parent
- Developing new interests

I feel:



No balance yet   Some balance   Balanced

*Remember:*

All major transitions are stressful, even when they are ultimately positive. Some of us don't enjoy any change much at first. It can take some time to adjust. Stress can give us the energy to deal with changes. However, stress can also feel--and be---overwhelming. Stress makes it hard to feel normal and to do your best as a parent. As with everything, the experience of restructuring a family changes over time. Everyone deals with it at their own pace. Most people find it gets much easier as time passes—even people who initially didn't want to split up or divorce.

Until things settle down to a “new normal,” ask yourself from time to time, “Am I managing alright?” If the answer is ever “no” seek help from friends, family, a counselor or a doctor.

Duck's model for relationship dissolution, Duck, S.W. (2011) Rethinking relationships, pp. 171-192. Duck S. W., ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage):

## **II: COPING WITH STRESS**

It is very important to have stress management strategies in place, both for yourself and for your children. Remember, your children are looking to you to understand how to cope with a very significant life change. Modeling appropriate stress management is one of the key ways to help your children adjust during the transition.

One way to reduce stress is to feel that you are taking charge of your own life. Here are some suggestions for ways in which you can take charge and reduce your stress levels.

### **Understand Yourself**

- o List your good points and post the list where you can see it
- o Build close relationships with people who help you feel important and appreciated
- o Talk over personal feelings and concerns with a trusted friend or relative

### **Break the Cycle of Stress**

- o Eat slowly
- o Walk slowly
- o Talk slowly
- o Take time to listen and hear what people are telling you
- o Give yourself time – minimize rushing around
- o Get enough rest

### **Schedule Recreation**

- o Go somewhere you enjoy with a friend or relative
- o Play your favorite sport
- o Work on your favorite hobby
- o Try a relaxing activity, such as yoga

## **THE EMOTIONAL ICEBERG**

### II. COPING WITH STRESS

#### **Above the water: VALID PARENTING CONCERNS**

Under the water: LINGERING FEELINGS, INSECURITIES, ANGER,  
RESENTMENT, PAST HURTS, VALUE CONFLICTS, NEGATIVE BELIEFS

What is under the water in your iceberg (write them in)?

## II. COPING WITH STRESS

In addition to the “emotional icebergs” there are a wide variety of competing pressures:

- **The Court System-** The court system is designed for two “opposing” parties to present separate information and receive “judgment” by an authority responsible for decisions. The legal system can be fast paced and difficult to understand. Many people feel afraid and embarrassed to have their personal information discussed there. Custody decisions are based on the “child’s best interest” which can result in competition with your co-parent about who understands and can meet the “child’s best interest” better.
- **Lawyers-** Although lawyers can be helpful, their job is often to promote their client’s “best interests” without considering how decisions affect the co-parenting relationship and the child. A focus on “winning” rather than agreeing can prolong disputes.
- **Money and Moving-** Divorce usually results in a loss of income as people separate their finances and households, pay legal fees, and

support two homes. Parents' system of managing money together or separately often must change which can be a source of stress.

- **Societal and Cultural Norms-** Divorce may or may not be accepted in one's culture, spiritual practice or family leading to feelings of guilt or shame. It may also interrupt comfortable relationships or practices, creating a sense of loss.
- **Family and Peer Pressure-** Sometimes friends and family can pressure you to feel like you "should" react a certain way towards your co-parent during a divorce. Similarly, sometimes family and friend's own anger towards your co-parent may lead them to badmouth your co-parent or to bring up past events between you and your co-parent. This can make it difficult for you to focus on the co-parenting relationship rather than the prior romantic relationship. It can be even more stressful when family and friends speak negatively about your co-parent in front of your children.
- **Co-parenting Conflict-** Post-divorce conflict between co-parents can affect their own and their children's physical and psychological wellbeing. Co-parents who are constantly fighting often have difficulty focusing on their own and their children's physical and emotional needs. Co-parents who learn how to manage their feelings of anger, sadness, and guilt without resorting to fighting may be better able to cope with stressors and to focus on their own and their children's wellbeing and happiness.
- **Work –** Divorce can interrupt typical arrangements around work, childcare and/or create extra "jobs" that drain time and contribute to stress.

**Parenting Responsibilities:** Custody agreements often change longstanding schedules, roles, and routines. This can contribute to distress when a parent needs to take on new roles and tasks during their parenting time. Parents also have to manage their own feelings of sadness or anger about the divorce while providing comfort to their children.

**What pressures have affected you? Are there things on your list that are not here?**

### **ACTIVITY**

- **What has been the most stressful part of the divorce experience so far?**
- **What may help you manage this stress?**

Adamsons, K., & Pasley, K. (2006). Coparenting following divorce and relationship dissolution. In M. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.). *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 241-262). New York: Erlbaum.

## THE CONFLICT DANCE

### II COPING WITH STRESS

Conflict is usually a reason behind divorce, and often escalates during the separation process. Many “iceberg” factors influence the approach to conflict following separation. Underlying beliefs and emotions may make simple tasks complicated.

The conflict dance (Johnson, 2004) refers to the fact that much like a dance, co-parents’ arguments tend to follow predictable patterns that often have to do with their underlying beliefs and emotions. Co-parents may unknowingly trigger each other’s underlying beliefs and emotions. When this happens co-parents can become defensive resulting in arguments that are more about their past romantic relationship than on parenting issues.

A typical example of this is pick up and drop off transitions.

Here are Mary and Bob. Bob is under a lot of pressure at work and sometimes is 10-20 minutes late for pick up and drop off. Mary remembers that he was also often late during their marriage. Today Bob is again running late. Both of them are having thoughts and emotions on their way to exchange their five year old daughter.

Great. I’m going to be five minutes late and she is going to flip out. Everything is always  
the end of the world!

I can’t believe that he is late again. He has no respect for me or my time!

## II COPING WITH STRESS

Mary is upset by the time Bob arrives. Bob is feeling irritable and defensive. He notices that Mary has her new boyfriend in the car with her, and their daughter. He has told Mary that he is not comfortable having this “new guy” around his daughter.

Bob and Mary are now both finding it difficult to focus on their daughter, who is getting out of the car with her backpack.

They are experiencing symptoms of “flooding.”

- 

Racing pulse

- 

Rapid/short breaths

- 

Stomach tight/upset

- 

Controlled Facial Expressions

- 

Muscle tension

Gottman, J. (n.d.). Emotional flooding and what to do about it. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from <http://www.giuisilvestri.com/articles/emotional-flooding-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

I can't believe she brought that guy with her.

I can't believe that he is mad at me after he was 20 minutes late!

## **FLOODING**

**When you feel stressed or threatened → your brain becomes flooded with cortisol. During conflict and emotional flooding the left brain (thinking) is under-activated and the right brain (feeling) is over-activated.**

Left Brain: “Logical brain”, generally conscious, language, thinks in words, planning, examines details, rational analysis, systemic solutions, positive emotions such as calm, contentment, etc.

Right Brain: “Relationship brain”, generally unconscious, observes relationships, thinks in pictures, creativity, art, intuition, non-verbal skills, facial recognition and cues, gut feelings, negative emotions such as hurt, anger, fear, etc.

**Have you ever experienced the fight/flight/freeze response?**

## **HANDLING FLOODING**

### **II COPING WITH STRESS**

▶ **BAD NEWS:** “Flooding” can occur without you or your ex- partner **DOING ANYTHING**. All that has to happen is **THINKING** about a conflict, or a **POSSIBLE** problem and this physical response can take place.

▶ **GOOD NEWS:** You can **STOP** the flooding!

▶ **How to make it better:**

◦ **Take a 20 minute break to let your system re-set**

**Set a timer on your phone**

**No decisions, reactions, texts, emails or confrontation while flooded**

◦ **Take slow deep belly breaths**

◦ **Re-engage left brain- Make a list (e.g., groceries, things you love about your children)**

◦ **Keep pictures or videos of your children on your phone to look at when you start feeling upset**

◦ **Go for a walk**

◦ **Exercise**

◦ **Tense and release different muscles in your body**

◦ **Go outside and focus your attention on the nature around you (pay attention to the color of the sky and leaves)**

◦ **Put on headphones and listen/dance to music**

◦ **Take a warm shower**

◦ **Keep your child’s wellbeing in the forefront- “What’s my goal”**

Gottman, J. (n.d.). Emotional flooding and what to do about it. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from <http://www.giuisilvestri.com/articles/emotional-flooding-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq. <http://www.highconflictinstitute.com/>

## **RETURN TO THE CONFLICT DANCE**

### II COPING WITH STRESS

Back to Bob and Mary.

In the future Mary brings her IPAD so that she and her daughter can play a game together or sing songs off their playlist if they have to wait for Bob. Mary does not ask her new boyfriend to come with her because it is awkward for all of them, including their daughter. Since she is not sitting in the car focusing on Bob being late, she is less angry when Bob arrives.

In the future, Bob does not spend his last hour at work dreading having to face Mary, so he gets out on time. He looks forward to seeing his daughter, so he doesn't worry about whether Mary is giving him dirty looks or remembering how many times he has been late in the past. He reminds himself that Mary's boyfriend is just another guy who is not replacing or better than him. His daughter is still his daughter, no matter what relationship she forms with new people in Mary's life.

This will sometimes feel like the last thing you instinctually want to do, but

**THE BEST CHANCE FOR GETTING A GOOD RESPONSE IS GIVING A GOOD RESPONSE. To choose RESPONSE rather than REACTION USE:**

- ▶ **Use Active Listening**
- ▶ **Use "I statements"**
- ▶ **Try to see the situation from their perspective**
- ▶ **Suggest ending the conversation and pick a time to re-approach the topic when you both are "less heated"**

P.S. This is useful with children too.

Gottman, J. (n.d.). Emotional flooding and what to do about it. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from <http://www.giuisilvestri.com/articles/emotional-flooding-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

## **PERSONAL STRESS SYMPTOMS**

### II COPING WITH STRESS

During a stressful time, people's behavior changes. This might include;

## **BEHAVIORAL STRESS RESPONSES**

Changes in eating Easily Impatient Withdrawing Crying

Changes in sleep Nightmares Aggression Restless

Drug or Alcohol use Agitation Exhaustion More Permissive

## **What have you experienced?**

## **THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS RELATED TO STRESS**

- Thinking you cannot cope  Having a negative world view
- Feeling frightened for no reason  Feeling bored with everything
- Worrying about everything  Unable to concentrate
- Feeling afraid something will happen  Feeling like you will "fall apart"
- Thoughts that repeat over and over  Unable to make decisions
- Negative view of yourself  Confusion
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness\*

• It is normal to have all of these experiences at one time or another. If these feelings come up often, it might be a good idea to seek help from family, friends, a therapist or doctor to help get back on track.

SOURCES OF STRESS II COPING WITH STRESS

The divorce process can lead to changes in emotions and behaviors.

**Rate your level of the following emotional responses.**

**LOW MED HIGH LOW MED HIGH**

**SHOCK**

**ELATION**

**LONELINESS**

**ANGER**

**GUILT**

**DENIAL**

**HURT**

**SHAME**

**ANXIETY**

**IMPATIENCE**

**SADNESS**

**ACCEPTANCE**

**FLOODED**

**Rate whether you have experienced changes in any of the following:**

YES NO YES NO

**EATING**

**YELLING**

**SLEEPING**

**SELF-CARE**

**DRUG USE**

**ALCOHOL USE**

## **PATIENCE**

## **PARENTING BEHAVIORS**

## **STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH FAMILY CHANGE II COPING WITH STRESS**

The divorce process can lead to changes in relationships, roles, tasks, sense of identity, and to feelings of loss. Rate the degree to which you experienced these potential sources of stress.

**LOW MED HIGH**

**HOUSEHOLD/TASKS Family Finances**

**Household chores**

**Work/Family Relationships**

**Friends**

**Parenting Roles & Responsibilities MULTIPLE LOSSES Close Emotional Ties**

**Loss of Control**

**Sense of Expected Family Life IDENTITY CHANGES Being Single Again Personal Identity Group Identity Questions: Who am I? What do I want to do with my life?**

### **III. COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS**

#### **FORGING A NEW PARENTING PARTNERSHIP**

#### **GOALS**

In this part of the session, we will focus on co-parenting. “Co-parenting” means working together to raise your kids even when you are no longer together as a couple. Cooperation between co-parents is very helpful to help children adjust in their changing environment.

#### **ACTIVITY**

What has changed for you as a parent and as a co-parent?

What are the challenges/potential challenges in your co-parenting relationship?

What changes will happen in the next six months?

What has surprised you?

### III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

The Co-parenting Relationship: Having a civil relationship with your co-parent will lower stress in your life as well your child's life. Having a cooperative co-parenting relationship allows both parents to be part of their child's lives. How will your child benefit from having both parents in his/her life? Think about important events in your children's futures. Will you both be at his/her graduation or wedding? Do you want your child to spend his/her "big day" worrying about his/her parents getting along?

**Most families have had trouble communicating at one time or another. You are not alone! There are strategies that can help!**

Key points about co-parenting:

- After separation and divorce both parents still have and want—to play a key role in their children's lives. Children still want two parents and all their love and support.
- Responsibilities need to be re-organized and shared in a new and effective way.
- All parents need to work out issues of money, visitation, responsibility, chores, and appropriate discipline.
- A cooperative relationship helps children of all ages to adjust to the divorce or separation
- Conflict between former partners is probably inevitable; what is important is how, where, and when you deal with it.
- When you ask them, most parents agree that they would like their kids to be able to love both parents as much as they can for as long as they can.

*Ahrons, C. R. (1994). The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Falls Apart. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.*

# **RELATIONSHIPS AFTER DIVORCE: WHERE ARE YOU?**

Ahrons (1994)

## **III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS**

### **PERFECT PALS**

- Remain Close Friends
- Easily share custody of the children and child-rearing responsibilities
- Solve problems together
- Engage in minimal conflict with each other

### **COOPERATIVE COLLEAGUES**

- Manage to be friendly and pleasant but are not close friends
- Focus their conversations and time on their kids
- Are able to separate their failed relationship from their responsibilities as parents
- May have personal conflicts but keep children out of it and manage to solve most problems related to kids

### **ANGRY ASSOCIATES**

- Have difficulty parenting because of anger with the ex-partner
- Have difficulty staying focused on what the children need
- Have difficulty supporting the other parent due to anger
- Argue over issues that quickly lead back to unresolved marital fights
- Frequently engage in power struggles over custody and finances
- Have children who are often angry and embarrassed by their parents' behavior.
- Children are often caught in loyalty conflicts.

### **FIERY FOES**

- Exhibit frequent hostility toward one another-in private and in public
- View each other as terrible people, bad parents, and even hated enemies
- Lack co-parenting skills. Blame most problems on the other parent.
- Seem unable to change anything about the relationship even years after the breakup because they are still focused on anger and disappointment
- Have children who are usually caught in loyalty conflicts
- Have children who know their parents and extended family members hate each other

### **DISSOLVED DUOS**

- Cut off all contact with their co-parent or their kid entirely
- One parent has total responsibility for the children
- May have children who feel rejected and unloved by the missing parent

**WHERE ARE YOU? WHAT CAN YOU DO ON YOUR OWN TO GET WHERE YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE?**

*Ahrons, C. R. (1994). The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Falls Apart. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.*

### III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

**No matter how angry you and your former spouse may be with each other, you have to continue to communicate for the sake of your kids. Remember, your children learn how to handle themselves with other people by watching you do it. It's useful to remember that**

- Both parents like to be recognized for what they do well as a parent
- Nobody is going to help you when you need it if all you do is put them down

Letting go of your co-parent's failure as a romantic partner and seeing him/her only as a parent can be difficult. If you truly can't find anything positive to say about him/her at least think about why your child loves him/her.

What are three things you do well as a parent?

What are three things your co-parent does well as a parent?

### **III. COOPERATIVE PARENTING STRATEGIES**

- Pick a time and place for having reasonable and successful discussions about your kids and their needs.
- Before the conversation, remind yourself that your goal is doing what is in the best interest of your child. These conversations should not be times to seek revenge, no matter what your ex-partner did.
- Plan a clear description of the issue and what you feel is the best solution for your child.
- Consider options for compromise—especially those that you know your co-parent may suggest or agree with.
- Recognize that your co-parent may find some things non-negotiable. Pick your battles. You won't get your way every time—nobody does. Is it worth it?

### **MORE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES**

- **LIST OPTIONS** Consider each person's suggestions and brainstorm solutions that neither of you have considered. Consider compromise.
- **MAKE REVISIONS** Find something you can agree to try. Do part of what each of you wants to do (BOTH/AND)
- **TRY TO FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS RATHER THAN PROBLEMS** Commit to making an effort to try suggestions before discounting them. Try the communication and conflict resolution strategies discussed later on in this packet.

Activity: Which strategies could you use in your co-parenting?

## LESS EFFECTIVE PATTERNS TO RE-WORK

**“KITCHEN SINKING”** When a conflict arises, listing everything that’s wrong at once rather than focusing on the issue.

“I can’t believe you’re late again, and you never send the kids’ clothes or books back when they visit you. They are behind in their schoolwork. You never think of anyone but yourself! Just like when you wouldn’t let me have the kids for my mother’s birthday party.”

Note that statements starting with “YOU ALWAYS,” and “YOU NEVER” signal that the conversation is not likely to end well. These are attacking statements that usually bring on defensiveness.

**MINDREADING** Assuming you know what someone thinks/feels without asking. This invites the other party to not listen to you as you do their thinking for them.

**INTERRUPTING** Cutting off the other person mid-sentence to interject your own thoughts or comments. This invites the other party to not listen to you or share their own thoughts.

**“YES-BUTTING”** Finding a problem or flaw with any suggestion.

“You would like the children to go to bed at a reasonable hour. What if we both had them go to bed at 9:30 at each of our houses?”

“Yes, but that won’t work because I’ll never remember to do that on nights when they get home late from baseball. You need to make them listen to me when I say it’s time for bed.”

**CROSS COMPLAINING** Answering a complaint with one of your own.

“I really wish you would be on time to pick up the kids.” “Oh yeah? I really wish you would spend the money I sent you on the sneakers we agreed on, rather than taking them to see that stupid movie.”

## RELATIONSHIP KILLERS: The “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” Gottman (1999)

CRITICISM Focuses on the person rather than the problem behavior:

“I can’t believe you never make Kevin do any chores, you’re teaching him to be as lazy and irresponsible as you are.”

DEFENSIVENESS Blames the other person and makes them responsible for the undesired behavior while taking no personal responsibility:

“It’s not my fault he’s too lazy to do anything at my house, you’re the one who did everything for him when he was younger.”

***CONTEMPT Insulting or condescending behavior, often paired with an eye roll or a sneer. This is the single most damaging form of communication present in any relationship:***

“I shouldn’t be surprised anymore; you’ve always been a failure”

STONEWALLING (Withdrawal) Shutting down, withdrawing emotionally, psychologically, or physically from an interaction. Ignoring the other person, leaving the room/premises, all to avoid any contact with them.

The following blog has helpful information about ANTIDOTES for the four relationship killers most associated with relationship dissatisfaction/divorce:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-the-antidotes/>

*Gottman, J. (1999). The marriage clinic : a scientifically-based marital therapy. New York :W.W. Norton.*

## **REORGANIZING FOLLOWING THE END OF THE RELATIONSHIP**

### **III COOPERATIVE PARENTING**

#### **HOUSEHOLD TASKS**

Cleaning, Cooking, Shopping

Home repair/maintenance Car repair/maintenance

#### **FAMILY FINANCES**

Assets and Debts,

Alimony and Child Support Activities

RELATIONSHIPS Children Extended Family Friends Spiritual Community Dating and Sex Ex-in laws

WORK Work Relationships Work Schedule/Obligations Childcare Leisure time/Vacations

PARENTING ROLES/RESPONSIBILITIES Discipline School Expectations Values Questions Activities Spiritual/Cultural

### III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

#### **ACTIVITY: DISCIPLINE**

- What works well about the way you discipline your child?
- What changes, if any, do you notice now that your households have separated?
- Could you ask for your co-parent's help in carrying over a "consequence" from one house to the other if it's needed?
- What would be the benefit of that to your child?

#### **ACTIVITY: MONEY**

- How do you negotiate the exchange of money?
- Do you follow a strict agreement made by the court, or do you do more than the court requires?
- How has your child's life changed financially?
- What is your financial responsibility to your child's child care, schooling, future?

#### **ACTIVITY: VALUES**

- Do you have similar views as your co-parent on bedtimes, food, appropriate clothes/language, dating?
- What will that be like for your child?

#### **ACTIVITY: TWO HOUSEHOLD LIFESTYLE**

- What is it like for your child to live in two different homes?
- Do they want to visit the other parent?
- Do they talk to you about the other home?
- What do you say when they don't want to go/tell you something that bothers them about the other parent/other home?
- How well have you been doing about saying good things/or nothing at all about the other parent?
- How could you improve/keep things moving in a positive direction?

## **WHAT IS INVOLVED IN CO-PARENTING YOUR KIDS? lii**

### **COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS**

Parents must decide what aspects of parenting to share. This will often depend on where children live, how often they see each of their parents, and the parents' abilities to discuss issues with one another without conflict or "rehashing" the past. Ask yourself:

What decisions will you need to make? Some of the standard categories are decisions about education, religion, extracurricular activities, medical and mental health treatment, sporting events, and social activities.

How will you make the decisions? Will you talk with one another? Write emails? Text? Meet once a year over coffee to discuss the major decisions and how your children are doing?

How and when will you talk to your ex-spouse? For example, will you only try to talk to one another when a decision has to be made? Maybe when you "exchange" the children? Will you set up a regular time once a month to check in with each other? Will you send emails to each other?

How will you arrange and share schedules? When will the children see each parent? How flexible do you want to be about scheduling? What if your co-parent is 30 minutes late? How will you decide to deal with this? Will the schedule vary with school or summer schedules? Will the schedule change as your children get older, and will the children have a say in what they want?

Who will provide childcare when a parent is available? If one parent is unavailable will the other parent have "first refusal?" Will the children go to the same babysitter? Or will they have a different babysitter near each parent's home? How might extended family help out, and would this be beneficial for the family overall?

How will you handle discipline? Will each parent handle discipline on their own? If a child misbehaves at mom's house, should he/she be disciplined by both mom and dad? If a child misbehaves at school, will he/she receive discipline across homes, or just at the home she goes to after school?

What will happen in an emergency? In an emergency will parents notify each other before emergency medical treatment? Or after one parent has given consent for treatment? Have you exchanged all emergency contact information such as work numbers, home numbers, cell phone numbers? Sometimes these change when couples divorce. School officials and caregivers should have this information as well.

## DISCUSSION LARGE GROUP III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

**What are some things that people do when fighting that HELP solve the problem? What are some things that people do when fighting that DON'T HELP solve the problem?**

As we all know some fights are about differences in solving a problem and others can become just about winning. It can be hard not to want to win at times.

When the focus is on “winning” and “losing” it is difficult to achieve a compromise, or a combined solution that supports everyone’s needs and values. Instead, people get caught up in proving their “positions” and have difficulty “saving face,” or feeling that they can still be respected, if they change their mind, compromise, and are able to see the other side.

**TO RESOLVE CONFLICT AND MOVE OUT OF WIN/LOSE THINKING  
AVOID “FLOODING”:**

### **WHAT HELPS**

- Take a 20 minute time out
- o Engage in self-care activity
- o Deep breathing
- o Go for a walk
- Pick your battles
- Move past your personal experience as a husband/wife and deal with your ex as a parent
- Change/improve communication skills

Davis, M., & Robbins Eshelman, E, (2008) The relaxation and stress reduction workbook. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc.

## COMMUNICATION SKILLS III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

**PASSIVE ACTION I LOSE/YOU WIN** Creates resentments on both sides, loss of respect, Invites isolation, needs not getting met, guilt, anger One person becomes a perpetual “victim” with their needs not getting met. The “winner” feels guilty, or entitled to take more. Children lose respect for both parents, feel confused, attempt to take care of parents or fight, take sides. Children may lose connection with either parent- their needs are not central.

**AGGRESSIVE ACTION I WIN/YOU LOSE** Creates resentment on one side, guilt on the other

Invites lying, revenge, isolation, fear The “aggressor” “gets their way” and instills fear in others, sometimes feeling guilty or unrealistically entitled to unearned love, respect. The “victims” lie and distance themselves from the aggressor. Children take sides, may lose connection or respect for one or both parents, their needs are not central. This can be “overt” as in using violence or being over-bearing, controlling or “covert” as in using manipulation and dishonesty.

**PASSIVE/AGGRESSIVE ACTION NO WIN I LOSE/YOU LOSE** Creates resentment, confusion, anger, fear

Invites aggression, isolation, lying, revenge One person takes their resentment out on the other in disconnected ways that are never openly explained (holding back children or child support), so the other person never knows what needs to be changed to fix the situation. Everyone is confused, fearful, unhappy, disrespected, nobody’s needs get met.

**ASSERTIVE ACTION WIN/WIN** Creates connection, clarity, compromise

Invites solutions, open communication Everyone gets respected, even if they do not get what they want. Solutions are collaborative, and create something that appeals to the values and interests of everyone involved.



### CONFLICT RESOLUTION iii COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

**“Diplomacy is the art of letting someone else have their way” Daniele Vare, Italian diplomat “Be soft on the people, hard on the problem.”**

GETTING PAST NO:NEGOTIATING IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS, William Uhry, Bantam Books, 2007

**“Your goal may be to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement, but you may find the other side not at all interested in such an outcome. They may not see HOW it will benefit them. Even if you can satisfy their interests, they may fear losing face if they have to back down. And if it is your idea, they may reject it for that reason alone.”**

**“If it is a win-lose proposition, they will be determined to beat you. If they can get what they want by power plays, why should they cooperate with you?”**

### **STEPS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Step One: Suspend your natural reaction (“iceberg” memories, emotional flooding, conflict dance, negative thoughts and beliefs).

What is really important to you?

Step Two: Help the other person to suspend their natural reaction (“iceberg” memories, emotional flooding, conflict dance, negative thoughts, and beliefs) by not putting them in a defensive position with attacks.

Find out what is really important to them.

Step Three: Cooperation. Act as if the other person is genuinely interested in resolving the problem. See their side. Learn more from them about what they want from their suggestions about solving the problem. If you push against them, they will naturally dig in further. Are there options that satisfy both sides? III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

Step Four: Apply standards of fairness. In this situation, what would typically be fair? Is everybody being treated with respect? Is there a sense

of equality between parents? Are children's needs/developmental level considered? What would the general public say? What is common for your culture or spiritual community? What does the law say? Has this problem been solved in the past by you or others in certain ways that worked?

Step Five: Creatively try to "build a bridge" between what is important to them and what is important to you. Win-Win. Is it possible to do Both/And rather than Either/Or?

"But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him/(her) In!"  
Edwin Markham

Step Six: Resist the temptation to coerce or escalate! This typically results in stand-offs and power struggles. Use your power to communicate.

**Consider Your Alternatives: What is the "Best Alternative to Not Agreeing (BATNA)?"**

1) What can you do all by yourself to pursue what is important to you?

2) What is your walk away alternative?

3) What influences the other side to address what is important to you?  
(court, their family, friends, child's school)

4) Is there a way a third or neutral party can help create an agreement?

Resources for parenting plan conflict resolution and mediation are available at your local Civil Court location. Contact Family Services for assistance.

<https://www.jud.ct.gov/cssd/familysvcs.htm>

<https://www.jud.ct.gov/csc/loc.htm>

*Uhry, W. (2007). Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations. New York: Bantam Books.*

### **BRIEF INFORMATIVE FRIENDLY FIRM**

- Making Proposals the BIFF way
- Make your life easier by focusing only on what is needed
- Email gives you time to think about your response
- Encourages “wise mind” (non-flooded, thoughtful, fair)
- Creates a record of the communication

### **Making Proposals**

- **Who does**
- **What**
- **When and**
- **Where**

**Hi Anne, I would like to take Peter to my office’s family holiday party, Thursday, 12/15/17 from 5-7 pm. I know I usually have Peter on Wednesdays, so I could take him that Thursday instead of Wednesday. I can pick him up at school and drop him off by 8:00. Please let me know if this is possible.**

**Thank you, John**

**Sometimes you may get a negative response:**

**John, Absolutely not! You never help Peter with his homework. I’m not having him get back at 8 full of sugar and then I have to stay up until 10:00 doing his homework. I bet you want him to go to see that new girlfriend of yours. Nice try! Anne**

**How to respond to a proposal or to a negative response to your proposal:**

- KEEP IT SIMPLE!**
- You don't need to defend yourself or justify**  **Responses=**
- Yes**  **No**  **I'll think about it (specify when you will have an answer)**

**Anne,**

**Thanks for getting back to me. I would have liked to take Peter but it is your time and I will respect your choice.**

**John**

**It can save time to have a word template or draft saved so you only have to fill in new information!**

**WORD TEMPLATE**

**Hi Anne,**

**I would like to switch these days, XXXX because of XXXX. Is it possible for me to take (child's name) next XXXX instead of XXXX?**

**Please let me know either way by XXXX.**

**Thank you John**

**Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq. <http://www.highconflictinstitute.com/>**

**Be as flexible as possible about visitation schedules**

- Give the other parent plenty of advance notice about changes
- Give the other parent your vacation schedule in advance, and when possible, provide your itinerary
- Consider your children's plans that may affect your time

**Make time with each parent a normal part of life**

- Find activities that give you and your children opportunities to share work/school responsibility, play, or just "hang out"
- Provide a balance of fun and responsibility for your children
- Encourage visits 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 that is their home too
- Help your children get to know others in the neighborhood so that they can have friends at both homes
- Keep a routine and a schedule preparing your children for transitions
- Have a checklist of items that children need to take back and forth
- Sometimes allow your children to bring friends along
- Occasionally, separate your children so that you have some individual time with each one
- Let little children bring a "transitional object" (favorite toy, reminder of their other parent) to help both homes so they feel connected to both parents

**Show respect for your former partner and concern for your children**

- Show up on time
- Inform them if a new person (baby sitter, romantic partner) will be part of the visit
- Share changes in address, telephone numbers, jobs etc.

**Don't refuse to communicate with your co-parent**

- Don't use your children as messengers to communicate about adult issues such as child support or the other parent's behavior
- Don't make your children responsible for making, canceling or changing plans for visits.
- Don't use your children to spy on your co-parent
- Don't use drop-off/pick up times to fight. Deal with important issues with independent meetings or phone calls when your children aren't present

**Don't try to disrupt your children's relationship with their other parent**

- Don't try to make your child feel guilty about spending time with their parent
- Don't use visits as rewards or punishments
- Don't tell your children you will feel lonely while they are away
- Don't withhold visits to punish your co-parent for past wrongs or missed child support payments
- Don't withhold visits because you feel your co-parent doesn't "deserve" to see the children- unless there is a genuine, imminent threat
- Don't falsely accuse anyone of abuse
- Try not to let activities interfere with visits. Work out an agreement with the other parent about how to share responsibility for activities
- Don't withhold phone calls from the child's other parent
- Don't speak negatively about your co-parent's new partner

**Don't allow your anger to affect your relationship with your children**

- Let your time be about you and them, not about your co-parent
- Don't hurt your children by not showing up or making them wait for you

**Don't try to buy your children's loyalty or love**

- Don't let your children refuse to visit unless you buy them something
- Don't let your guilt about the divorce affect your ability to provide guidance

and discipline or to hold your child accountable for a negative action

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## **VISITS: WHAT IF YOUR CHILDREN DON'T WANT TO GO?**

### III COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

Sometimes kids don't want to go to the other house even if nothing is really wrong or unsafe.

Is this a one or two time thing?

Is there a neutral reason your child wants to cancel, such as a friend's birthday party or a soccer game that they want to attend?

Is there a negative reason that your child wants to cancel, such as:

- Discomfort with a new partner
- Trouble talking to you
- Doesn't like your new rules or new food?
- Feels caught in the middle of some problem between you and your co-parent?
- Is worried about leaving mom or dad?
- Doesn't feel wanted?
- Believes you don't want them there?

What could you do if it's a one or two time thing?

What could you do if it's a neutral reason?

What could you do if your child is avoiding your or your co-parent's home for some negative reason?

How would you handle it if your child was angry at your co-parent? Or talking to your co-parent about being angry with you?

This is always separate from a true safety issue, which should involve professional investigation and confirmation/documentation by an outside authority, such as law enforcement, DCF and/or the court system.

## **WHEN YOU CAN'T COOPERATE**

For some co-parents, cooperation is not possible because of a risk for violence, or history with abuse that is emotionally and physically destructive to one or more family members. In these cases, the legal system has options to protect potential victims from violence, respond to threats, enforce the law, or help families cope with stalking or patterns of aggression that cause fear and danger.

“Abuse” in adult relationships has come to mean a pattern of power and control that results in a victim’s loss of self-esteem, control over his/her own life, ability to function as an adult or parent in the world. In addition to more obvious physical threats and violence, there is control over money, children, verbal/emotional attacks, isolation from others/possessiveness, blaming, privilege, and lack of personal responsibility/accountability for behavior. Abuse of this kind may include physical violence, injury, and in the worst cases, death. Conversations over the past thirty years with victims of domestic violence have led to the creation of the “Power and Control” and “Equality” wheels. The “Equality” wheel in the reverse, identifies fairness, equality, trust, mutuality, respect and honesty. While there have been more female domestic violence victims than males, this does not mean that these dynamics cannot be present with male victims or female aggressors.

211 RESOURCES <https://www.211ct.org/> 211 can connect you with safety resources in whatever town you live in, help to find resources if you are feeling emotionally very low

CONNECTICUT COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE Call 888-774-2900 for help or to talk to someone. Para hablar o recibir ayuda, llama al 844-831-9200.

### III WHEN YOU CAN'T COOPERATE, COOPERATIVE PARENTING SKILLS

“Abuse” of children should be reported to the CT Department of Children and Families for investigation. If discipline results in physical injury the state views this as abuse. Severe patterns of neglect (withholding medical care, food) or emotional threats can also be considered abuse. Spanking is not considered abuse if it does not result in injury, though it can have some of the same effects of the aggressive communication style.

**DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES To make a child abuse or neglect report, please call 1-800-842-2288 (TDD: 1-800-624-5518)  
<http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=2556&Q=314388>**

**Q. Can I be sued if I make a report?**

**Immunity from civil or criminal liability is granted to people who make required reports in good faith. Immunity is also granted to people who in good faith have not reported.**

**Anyone who knowingly makes a false report of child abuse or neglect shall be fined up to \$2,000 or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both. The identity of any such person shall be disclosed to the appropriate law enforcement agency and to the perpetrator of the alleged abuse.**

“Good faith” reporting means that you have a legitimate concern or belief that the child will be injured or harmed in some way. Not reporting in “good faith” means that you feel the child is generally safe, even if the behavior isn’t ideal (for example, another parent’s heavy drinking/dangerous behavior on weekends when they don’t have the child).

Making a “false report” as a tactic to get back at another parent, or to get your way in a custody negotiation is not advisable, as it works against you, the other parent, and your child.

<http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html>

## **IV. CHILDREN AND DIVORCE**

### **HOW SEPARATION AND DIVORCE AFFECT YOUR CHILD AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT**

- HOW YOUR ACTIONS AFFECT YOUR CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT
- HOW TO MINIMIZE YOUR CHILD'S STRESS LEVEL

ACTIVITY: Write down one thing that you want to teach your children about love and family in the next year

### **TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIVORCE**

Among the first decisions that parents have to make in a separation or divorce is- when, how, and what to tell the children. Telling children about a divorce may be very painful. You may be tempted to put off this task for as long as possible. But it is usually better for your children to know as soon as you have made the decision and before one of you moves out of the house.

The way you tell children about the divorce can set the tone for how they will respond to the news. These first conversations about divorce tell children something about what they can expect from you. If possible, you and your co-parent should tell your children calmly and together. If that is – or was—not possible in your family, don't worry! At times you will just do the best you can with the situation you have. However, we encourage both parents to understand that children have an easier time with divorce when parents work together to care for them.

#### IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

On one hand, most children know other children whose parents are divorced. That may be a comfort to them. However, knowing other divorced families may also scare them. It depends on how those families seem to your child. Your children may become anxious or worried around this time, although how individual children will respond may vary.

Questions:

1. List all the people who are probably/definitely talking to your child about the changes at home with their mom and dad:
2. What do you think your children worry about?
3. What are the pros and cons of divorce for kids?

# **IMPACT OF CHRONIC PARENTAL CONFLICT ON CHILDREN**

## **IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE**

### **a. PSYCHOLOGICAL**

- **Guilt**
- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**

### **b. PHYSICAL**

- **Stomach Distress**
- **Headaches/Migraines**

### **c. ACADEMIC/SOCIAL**

- **Poor performance**
- **Difficulty making/keeping friends**

### **d. BEHAVIORAL**

- **Impulsive behaviors**
- **Substance Use**
- **Risky Sexual Behaviors**
- **Aggression**
- **Self-Harm**

#### IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

Per Jennifer E. Lansford, CENTER FOR CHILD AND FAMILY POLICY, Duke University  
Lansford, Jennifer E. (2009). Parental Divorce and Children's Adjustment, Association for Psychological Science, IV: 2, 140-152.

A review of research (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991b) reported that loss of relationships with non-residential fathers influenced children getting involved with risky behavior, including premature sexual and alcohol/drug use. Families with frequent arguments, escalating hostility, criticism or anger create a stressful family environment that can undermine adolescents coping resources and increase their risk for depression, lower their academic achievement, and increase problems in social relationships.

Recent research also showed that traditional mother/father roles are changing, and parents blend roles with housework, child-rearing, and earning income outside the home differently than in the past. Post-divorce arrangements can be complex as a result, and may require more thought to maintaining relationships on both sides in parenting plans.

Studies showed that the best outcomes for children involved minimal conflict between parents, whether married or divorced, and the child's ability to sustain warm, reliable relationships with both parents.

Pew Research Center, (2016) Six Facts About American Fathers  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/16/fathers-day-facts/blog/article>

**Divorce video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbTFZ8cvHo4> The Child of Divorce Monica Epperson-Youtube**

## **FACTORS THAT AFFECT CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT**

### **IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE**

#### **CHILDREN'S REACTIONS DEPEND ON**

- The amount of involvement with each parent and with new partners
- The tension level and safety in the home before the divorce or separation
- Parents' adjustment to the divorce
- The parenting skills of both parents, agreement on childrearing and discipline
- Getting approval and love from both parents
- Openness to discussing the divorce with parents
- Changes in the finances for each family
- Other added stressors (moving, changing schools parental re-marriages)

#### **BEHAVIOR ASSOCIATED WITH CONFLICT AND POOR ADJUSTMENT**

- 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?

## **THE CHANGES: WHAT CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW**

### IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

□ They did not in any way cause the divorce □ Neither parent is rejecting the child □ It's OK to love both parents, even though they are mad at each other □ Although the parents' feelings toward each other have changed, the parents' love for the child will never change □ Both parents will continue to take care of the child and will provide for him or her □ Parents should try to agree on a reasonable and appropriate

explanation as to what is happening and why. The child needs just enough information to explain the divorce, but does not need to know many of the details. What would you have wanted and not wanted to know about your parents? □ 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; when he/she will see the other parent; where the child will go to school and spend vacations; when the child will see other family members (grandparents).

## **THE CHANGES: WHAT CHILDREN DO NOT NEED TO KNOW**

□ Unless the other parent is a genuine threat, the child does not need to be told anything that will affect his/her relationship with that parent. Parents need to be truthful, but should not bring up issues that have to do with the two adults, such as money problems, or sexual matters. Children do not benefit from knowing about extramarital affairs or details about the impact on marriage of adult problems like gambling, drug and alcohol addiction and cheating.

If you wouldn't like someone to post it on a billboard next to your house, it's probably NOT the kind of detail your kids need to know.

## IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

### DISCUSSION

1. What kinds of changes have you seen in your child's behavior? 2. Why do you think kids have those reactions? What is the underlying need you think they have? (security, affection, sadness, anger, confusion, worry...?) 3. How long do you think those reactions will last? 4. What have you done about it so far? Can you think of something else that you might try? 5. Who else can help them besides you? 6. How will you know when your child is settling down and adjusting? 7. Do you see any connection between your response to the divorce and your children's experience? 8. What would you say/do if your child did not want to go visit with your co-parent one weekend? How about if they don't want to go three weekends in a row?

### WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S GREATEST WORRIES

- Many children worry about the parent who is leaving, where will that parent live, how will that person manage, will that parent be safe, comfortable, happy?
- Children worry that they will be forced to take sides by parents, grandparents, or other family members
- They worry that they'll have to choose one parent over another
- They worry about how they will celebrate family occasions such as birthdays and holidays
- The child may worry about the disruption of routines, who will take care of the child when he/she becomes sick, who will take the child to soccer practice or piano lessons, who will sign the report cards
- Many children worry that parents will marry a new partner and that this will be a terrible experience for them.

Parents should ask the child what he/she finds worrisome, but recognize that the child might not even be able to identify those worries, especially at first.

## WHAT CAN PARENTS SAY TO REASSURE CHILDREN?

### IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

- Once you have identified what worries your child, try to respond honestly to their concerns.
- WHO WILL I LIVE WITH AND WHERE? In cases where decisions such as living arrangements have still not been worked out, assure your children that you will tell them what decisions have been made as soon as possible.
- LOYALTY BINDS: Avoid putting the choice about who they live with on them, as it forces them to have to “choose” between parents. At the same time, it is not unusual for a child to want to live with a same sex parent because of shared interests, a parent who is familiar and supportive of their needs and routines, or a parent that has recently become more available to them. While it is important to consider children’s wishes as they approach adolescence, where children live should be decided by parents. It is also important that parents do not rely on their children for emotional support as this puts children in an inappropriate adult role.
- LISTENING: Children need to be reassured that parents will listen to their feelings. Children need to feel safe enough to talk about what is bothering them and to be upset at their parents, even if it makes parents feel guilty or sad. It is important to teach children how to express anger appropriately.
- CHANGE IS HARD, BUT MANAGEABLE: Co-parents need to acknowledge that divorce is an upsetting time for all members of the family. Reassure children that change—and anger—and sadness—are difficult but manageable experiences and that they will feel differently in time.
- INTRODUCE NEW PARTNERS SLOWLY—in small doses. Recognize why children might feel threatened—most of you might feel the same way about getting to know new people.

## HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH DIVORCE

### IV. CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

Here are some suggestions for things you can do to help your children through these difficult times. Notice the actions that you have already taken, or the ones that you plan to take: Reassurance Stability Assure your child that the divorce was not his/her fault

Maintain the individual relationship that you have with your child Reassure your child that he/she is loved by both parents

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

Stick to a daily routine with your child. Make changes in your child's life as slowly as possible, giving your child opportunities to discuss these changes with you and rewarding your child for good efforts in adjusting to the changes Encouragement Fairness 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.

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

Support Security 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

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 children 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 Open Circle of Support Show your child that you trust his/her ability to adapt to these changes

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

# TALKING ABOUT THE “BIG STUFF” WITH YOUR CHILDREN

## IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

A separation is when parents decide to live apart and figure out what’s best for their marriage.

Sometimes kids feel caught in the middle during a separation.

Usually children want their parents to stay together. Sometimes things can feel so bad that children might wish their parents would separate.

Sometimes things are better for a family after parents decide to separate

I am leaving because your mother/father and I can’t get along and that makes it hard for everybody.

A divorce is when two adults decide that they no longer want to be married. They can’t live together happily anymore. They have changed as husbands and wives. Being parents is different. Parents never stop being parents.

Your mom will always be your mother and your dad will always be your father. You still have them no matter how the family changes.

Kids cannot cause a divorce. They also cannot keep a mom and dad together.

Being a parent and being a husband or wife are two different (and separate) jobs. Divorce, like marriage, is between adults only.

When two adults decide to divorce, at least one of them has to go to a courtroom and talk to a judge. The judge helps figure out the rules for the divorce. A lawyer works with the parents and the judge to write up a paper about visiting, living with, and caring for children. The paper says that the adults will no longer be married, but that they will always be parents.

It might be hard for you to know this, but these changes won’t hurt as much in the future as they do now.

**Try; talking with your child while they are sitting next to you (example: in the car) or while playing basketball or a game. It’s easier to talk if you are not looking directly at them. Throw a question out there and then just wait...and wait...they may just fill in the silence!**

## **INDICATORS OF CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE**

### **Children who are adjusting well to the divorce are usually**

- Doing satisfactory work in school □ Being reasonably active in social and recreational activities
- (sports, drama, clubs) □ Getting along with other children

### **Children who are having problems might be**

- Acting aggressively □ Refusing to listen to adults (parents, teachers, others) □ Misbehaving □ Becoming withdrawn or depressed

### **DESTRUCTIVE STRATEGIES: WHAT NOT TO SAY**

It's normal to feel angry and sad as your relationship with your co-parent changes. However, sometimes parents say things out of hurt or anger that puts kids in a bad position. The following is a list of specific remarks that you should not make to your child. If you find yourself saying words like these, stop and think about what it would be like to hear this yourself

- 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 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 not going □ 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

#### “LOYALTY BINDS” IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

- Children often feel the need to “pick sides,” which can be very painful when it involves “rejecting” someone they would normally love in order to avoid being rejected by someone they love. This is referred to as a “loyalty bind.” In high conflict situations, children sometimes choose the parent they view as most vulnerable, or the parent that they identify as having power. In order to deal with intense emotion they can cut off contact with their other parent for periods of time.
- This can be tremendously difficult for the parent who is cut off
- Sacrificing a relationship with a parent is painful for the child
- The child can become resentful of the parent they “chose” as they grow into adulthood
- The best defense is creating predictable relationships that maximize the best traits of both parents
- Children know who cares and can be consistent in the long run
- In the short-term find sources of support if there is a cut-off
- [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.naswma.org/resource/resmgr/imported/pc\\_Step\\_families\\_handout\\_3.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.naswma.org/resource/resmgr/imported/pc_Step_families_handout_3.pdf) Dr. Patricia L. Papernow

#### THESE BEHAVIORS CREATE “LOYALTY BINDS”

•

Letting children become involved in parental conflict

•

Fighting with ex-partner in front of the child

•

Complaining to others about your ex-partner in front of your child

•

Appearing visibly upset in front of the child often

•

Asking the child to act as a messenger to your ex

•

Asking excessive questions about the child’s time with the ex-partner

- 

Encouraging your child to disrespect your ex (i.e., If you're too tired, you don't have to go with dad/mom).

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**BOOKS** Children can often deal with feelings by relating to characters in a story. If a child reads about characters in a book experiencing the same feelings that the child is experiencing, then the child will not feel so alone. Stories, whether told aloud or read from a book, can serve as a non-threatening buffer to stress. This strategy works for both older and younger children.

By taking time to read or tell stories together, you can help your child feel safe and close. After completing a story, find ways to open conversation. Allow the child to process the content then share thoughts. Often children will talk about characters, not themselves. At some point, the emphasis shifts from the book to the shared experience. Children often can make the leap from the story to their lives. If this does not happen, open-ended questions (How did Max feel? Why?) can be used to see if the child is ready to talk.

## **PLAY**

**[https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart\\_brown\\_says\\_play\\_is\\_more\\_than\\_fun\\_it\\_s\\_vital](https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital)**

Particularly for young children, play is the primary means of expressing feelings. Sometimes parents can tell how children are feeling by watching their play or playing with them.

Take care not to impose your opinions on the child's feelings during play. Join in play only if asked. If your child feels you are directing instead of just playing, he or she may feel uncomfortable. Some play items that help elicit feelings include sand, water, board games, paints, finger paints, chalkboards, play dough, and puppets.

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

What kinds of changes have you seen in your child's behavior?

Why do you think kids have those reactions? What is the underlying need you think they have?

How long did you/do you think those reactions will last?

What have you done about it so far? Can you think of something else you might try?

Who can help them besides you?

How will you know when your child is settling down/adjusting?

Do you see any connection between your response to the divorce and your children's experience?

What would you say/do if your child did not want to go visit your ex one weekend? How about if they don't want to go for three weekends in a row?

## **DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN IV CHILDREN AND DIVORCE What Infants Understand**

### **What Parents Can Do**

Infants do not understand anything about marriage, divorce or separation. They DO notice changes in parent's moods and stress levels. They DO notice how parents respond to them

Infants understand sensory input but cannot process what is happening to them with language or reason.

□ Infants depend on caregivers to understand the world. In a secure environment they internalize a sense of safety and know that they can rely on their caregiver(s) to protect them. They develop a sense of themselves as they see how they affect their parents (make them smile, laugh) □ Infants commonly show signs of distress when parents argue or become emotionally disconnected for long periods of time □ When day-to-day routines are changed or familiar caregivers are not around, infants can feel insecure and have difficulty settling down

### **How Infants React/Signs of Distress Changes in eating or**

Try to keep normal, steady sleeping patterns  
routines

May have Diarrhea or

Try to remain calm in front constipation, or may spit  
of the baby up more than usual

Try to rest or relax when May seem fussy, fearful,  
the baby is sleeping anxious or clingy

Call on family and friends to help

Remember that even infants need contact with both parents

Know that your baby gets information about the world from your actions and emotions, be aware of the messages you are sending

## How What Toddlers

### Toddlers

### What Parents Can Do

#### Understand

React/Signs of Distress They understand that one parent no longer lives in the home, although they don't understand why

Toddlers are very aware of parents fighting and respond by acting out or trying to make the arguing stop in whatever way they can (crying, mischief, comforting)  Toddlers feel unsafe/stressed when their parent is unsafe or stressed  Toddlers think that they are in control of everything and are responsible for any tension in the home. This is called "magical thinking" and is normal developmentally. Children this age do not have the vocabulary to explain what they are feeling or to understand that they are not the cause of the argument  Routine and predictability provide security. When these things are interrupted, toddlers feel uneasy, stressed, and sometimes afraid.

Increased crying, clinging

Continue to provide behavior

nurturing and reassurance

Sleep Problems, changes

Continue established in toilet habits

routines

Return to earlier, more

Allow some return to more infantile behaviors, such as infantile behavior, but set demanding to be fed by clear limits for acceptable parents instead of feeding behavior while gently themselves

encouraging them to do the things that you know Often feel angry or that they are capable of frustrated about the situation but

can't understand or explain feelings

Avoid shaming them or

their

over-reacting punishing behavior

with

Acknowledge fears,

May express anger by

react calmly

throwing temper tantrums more frequently, acting sulky, hitting, being irritable, reckless or withdrawing

Keep stress of everyday life to a minimum by allowing extra time to accomplish tasks and trying not to hurry the child. May start to worry about any kind of separation and become fearful any time the parent is out of sight even briefly

Avoid negative comments about, complaints or criticism of the child's other parent in his/her presence regardless of whether you are happy or unhappy about the other parent's household. Children will respond to your emotional climate.

## How What Elementary School Elementary School

### What Parents Can Do

#### Children Understand

Children React/Signs of Distress Begin to understand what divorce means

They may feel deceived, or

Allow the child to express that the absent parent has  
their sad feelings without rejected them.

taking it personally They may hope strongly

Keep visitation schedules that their parents will get  
consistent and predictable back together.

Develop routines around schoolwork and avoid  They may miss their other parent  
shaming child about school performance

They may fear that parent(s) will stop loving them and test parent(s) by acting out   
Sometimes children side with one parent to: simplify their loyalty conflicts, to “take care”  
of a parent they believe depends on them or to appease a parent who

Keep up activities with peers and encourage success, don't punish with removing  
pleasurable activities that motivate the child  Have a good support system and self-  
care strategy for yourself and let your child see you using it has difficulty dealing with

Allow your child to their other parent

understand that you have sad or angry feelings at A significant change in grades or  
attitude about school  Consistent sadness or frequent crying, lack of enthusiasm,  
trouble sleeping

times, that this is normal and they are not responsible for managing your feelings.   
Share playful, fun and non-academic focused activities with your child

Physical symptoms like frequent headaches, stomach aches  Loss of pleasure in play

Encourage play dates with peer/ extended family and after-school/community  
activities

and interacting with peers

## How What Pre-teens and Preteens and

### Adolescents Understand

Adolescents React/Signs of Distress Understand, but usually do not accept, divorce or separation

Apathy, poor school

### What Parents Can Do

Keep open communication performance, conflicts with with your child peers and/or teachers or they may take a critical view of parents, be disturbed by parents dating/sexual behavior □ Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, apathy

□ Allow them to be angry with you and to express it respectfully □ Encourage relationships with school, teachers, friends, extended family and support positive ways to resolve conflict respectfully □ Premature sexual activity and risky behavior

□ Keep your own support network strong so that you □ Taking on an adult role can talk about challenges with their single parent. This puts adult pressure on a child who is development- ally not able to handle it. Children might side with one parent to simplify the conflicts about loyalty and then feel guilty about it. Children also feel angry when they are forced to choose between the two most important people in their lives. They may resent the parent they show loyalty to later for preventing their relationship with their other parent.

□ Continue to hold your child accountable, don't let bad behavior go because you feel guilty or sorry about the divorce □ Find ways for your child to negotiate with you and create win-win situations □ Remind yourself and your child that it is not necessary to "choose" one parent, but that each parent has unique gifts to contribute to their lives— sometimes even in the form of struggles. Focus on positive aspects of the relationship □ Avoid speaking negatively about your child's other parent. Rejection of the other parent is often perceived as a rejection of part of your child and can create confusion and fear.

## **CLOSING DISCUSSION**

What are your hopes/concerns for your kids in the next year?

What are your hopes/concerns for your kids' views of marriage and family?

What is something you hope your child will tell your grandchildren about you?