

A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE
CO -
PARENTING

ELSJE DU PLESSIS-BASSON



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Co-Parenting--What is the Goal?

At a minimum, biological parents should contain their anger and conflict to cooperate and compromise on issues of the children's welfare. At a maximum, co-parents can strive to enforce similar rules and standards of conduct in each of the children's homes. Most co-parents find it difficult to accomplish the former.

- We want our kids to feel **LOVED**.
- We want our kids to feel **HEARD**.
- We want our kids to **'BE KIDS'** and not deal with adult stress.
- We want our kids to have **CONSISTENCY** between homes and Schedules.
- We want our kids to know their **PARENTS** can get along for them no matter what..

Stepfamily conflict and ex-spouse conflict have several negative effects on children.

- Children in stepfamilies are less likely to complete high school.
- Have lower educational achievement.
- Leave home earlier.
- Are more likely to cohabit before marriage.
- Boys are more affected by divorce.
- Girls seem to be more affected by remarriage.

Parents who want to reduce these negative effects on their children should strive to be effective co-parents because it reduces between-home conflict and increases cooperation. Taming your tongue, for example, is critical to cooperating.

Conflict containment starts with controlling your speech. You cannot be an effective co-parent without doing so. Children carried undue emotional anxiety and burden because their parents could not set aside their differences and be adults.

Co-parenting does not mean sharing all decisions about the children or that either home is accountable to the other for their choices, rules, or standards. Each household should be autonomous but share responsibility for the children. It also does not mean that rules or punishment from one home cross over to the other home.

In addition, a negative comment subtly invites children to agree with the comment, which children hate to do. It implies they are choosing one parent over the other, and that brings guilt. Because of the internalized negativity and guilt over having to choose sides, Bray goes on to suggest that the child will eventually act out such hurt and anger in some destructive behavior. I say you can count on it. Are you making a POW swap every other weekend? How often do you trample your children's loyalties to the other country to persuade them to remain faithful to you? How has your new stepfamily affected the number of times children have with the other home? As citizens of two countries, your children should be privileged to all the rights, relationships, and responsibilities of each of those homes. Your job is to be at peace with the other country so your children can travel back and forth in security.

Guidelines for Co-Parents

The following are guidelines that will help you to help your children move back and forth between their two homes. All co-parents should seek out live according to these guidelines. Consider how you might make each a reality in your situation. Remember that you are responsible for your contribution to how you and your ex interact. Change your part of the interaction even if you believe your ex-spouse is to blame for the negative exchanges that have occurred in the past.

1. Work hard to respect the other parent and his or her household. Agree that each parent has a right to privacy and do not intrude into his or her life. Make space for different parenting styles and rules as there are many healthy ways to raise children. Do not demean the other's living circumstances, activities, dates, or decisions and give up the need to control your ex's parenting styles. If you have concerns, speak directly to the other parent.
2. Schedule a monthly (maybe more often) "business" meeting to discuss co-parenting matters. You can address schedules, academic reports, behavioural training, and spiritual development. Do not discuss your personal life (or your ex's); that part of your relationship is no longer appropriate. If the conversation turns away from the children simply redirect the topic or politely end the meeting. If you cannot talk with your ex-face to face due to conflict, use email or speak to the answering machine. Do what you can to make your meetings productive for the children.
3. Never ask your children to be spear or tattletales on the other home. These places them in a loyalty bind that brings great emotional distress. In fact, be happy when they enjoy the people in their new home. ("I'm glad you enjoy fishing with your step-dad.") If children offer information about life in the other home, listen and stay neutral in your judgment.
4. When children have confusing or angry feelings toward your ex, do not capitalize on their hurt and berate the other parent. Listen and help them to explore their feelings without trying to sway their opinions with your own. If you cannot make positive statements about the other parent, strive for neutral ones.
5. Children should have everything they need in each home. Do not make them bring necessities back and forth. Special items, like clothes or a comforting teddy bear, can move back and forth as needed.
6. Try to release your hostility towards the other parent so that the children cannot take advantage of your hard feelings. Manipulation is much easier when ex-spouses do not cooperate.
7. Do not disappoint your children with broken promises or by being unreliable. Do what you say, keep your visitation schedule as agreed, and stay active in their life.

Guidelines for Co-Parents (continued)

8. Make your custody structure work for your children even if you do not like the details of the arrangement. Update the other when changes need to be made to the visitation schedule. Also, inform the other parent of any change in job, living arrangements, etc. which may require an adjustment by the children.
9. If you plan to hire a babysitter for more than four hours while the children are in your home, give the other parent first right to that time.
10. Suggest that younger children take a favorite toy or game as a transitional object. This can help them make the transition and to feel more comfortable in the other home.
11. Regarding children who visit for short periods of time or spend time in another home: Sometimes it is tempting to only do "special activities" when all the children are with you. That may leave some children feeling that they are not as special as others. Do special things with different combinations of children (it's all right if someone feels disappointed, he or she wasn't able to go). Let the lives of those living with you remain unaltered, as much as possible, when other children come for visitation. Keep toys and possessions in a private spot where they are not to be touched or borrowed unless the owner gives permission (even while they are in the other home).
12. Help children adjust when going to the other home: If the children will go on vacation while in the other home, find out what's on the agenda. You can help your kids pack special items and needed clothing. Provide the other home with information regarding your child's changes. A switch in preferences (regarding music, clothes, hairstyles, foods, etc.) or physical/cognitive/emotional developments can be significant. Let the other home know what is different before the child arrives. When receiving children, give them time to unpack, relax, and settle in. Try not to overwhelm them at first with plans, rules, or even special treatment. Let them work their way in at their own pace.
13. If you and your ex cannot resolve a problem or change in custody or visitation, agree to problem solving through mediation rather than litigation.

Tools for Helping Children Thrive Between Homes

1. When children return from the other home, share what has been going on since they left.
2. Send lists of items to be returned. Children often forget items, such as their math book, and co-parents may assume it is being returned. Send a checklist of items that need to be returned so the child can be responsible (if old enough), or the co-parent can make sure it is returned.
3. Give children a little "grace space" as they adjust to your house and rules. Children can adjust to different rules in different homes. However, they may need gentle reminders of the rules in your home after spending time in the other. A simple reminder like, "I know you can stay up till nine at your mom's house, but the rule in our house is 8:30. Off you go." Do not argue with the other house's rule or take issue with the rule-makers. Just manage your home and give the kids a break while they reorient themselves.
4. "Choosing sides stink!" Try not to force loyalties as children move between homes. The transition from one house to the other is a natural time of comparison for kids. Do not ask them to make choices and answer their questions regarding the other home with neutral, supportive statements. If you cannot be supportive, do not expect your child to adopt your opinion and do not denigrate the other home.
5. "Who needs me the most?" When examining their fit in both homes, children often ask themselves which home needs them most. Even though their personal preference is with one home or the other, children will sometimes choose to invest themselves in the home where they are most needed. This could be due to an under-functioning parent who "needs help," or maybe the child has a unique role in one home she does not have in the other. The result is a child who sacrifices her preference for the good of others. Parents need to be understanding about this. Try not to personally take a child who is drawn to the other home; ask questions and listen to what pressures he faces. It may be that he cannot fix the situation and needs to be relieved of the responsibility to do so. But it also may be that there is a legitimate reason for him to spend more time in the other home (e.g., a parent's illness that requires extra support from him)

Building the Co-Parental Relationship

Create a strong boundary between old marital issues and the current parental relationship. This is a terribly difficult task to accomplish for most people. In effect, the couple redefines their relationship to one of parents only (trying partners to raise a child), not lovers. This is especially difficult when old buttons get pushed and past marital pain is resurrected through parental shed. Unless ex-spouses actively set aside their previous marital agendas, they will easily fall back into personal attacks and manipulative ploys. Again, the elephants start fighting and the grass gets trampled.

Putting to death the old marital bond with all its pain, power, and privilege is difficult. Yet, it's just what the doctor ordered for effective co-parenting to start. Your ex may have been inattentive to your marital needs, but you and your children have different needs. Many parents who were poor marriage partners are good parents and children enjoy them very much. Men often improve their parenting activity after divorce, yet their ex-wives assume they have not changed and do not give them the respect they deserve. Give your ex-spouse the opportunity to be wonderful with the kids.

Spoiled Leftovers from the Past: Coping with Anger, Hurt, and Guilt

Relational attachments come in many shapes and sizes. The highest attachment is, of course, selfless covenant love. What surprises most people are the realization that hurt, anger, and guilt can tie two people together as tightly as love. The root of such attachments is pain; it binds people together in disharmony. Even more surprising is the realization that conflict, bitterness, and control are the umbilical cords through which anger and guilt stay alive.

As criticism and defensiveness pass back and forth between ex-spouses, hurt and the bond of disharmony is kept alive. One of the greatest ironies of bitterness is it imprisons you with the person who hurt you. Over time you contribute to your own pain and misery. If you are the leavee (your ex left you) you probably feel more anger, days, and hurt. If you cannot set this aside and compartmentalize your feelings, you can easily spoil the co-parental relationship. If you were the leaver (you initiated the divorce) you may feel a great deal of guilt, especially when you see your children's pain. You may find it difficult to separate from your decision and fully invest in your present stepfamily situation.

Learning to Forgive

So what do you do? Note it goes with forgiveness. I know this is where I will lose some of you. Your back is already bowed, your blood pressure is going up, and you want to close the booklet. "After what he did to me, how least you suggest I forgive?"

Please understand, I do not take the suggestion to forgive lightly, nor do I believe it an easy task. Your pain is real, too, and your anger may be completely justified. Yet you cannot be for your family everything you need to be if you are carrying around a burden of anger, hurt, and guilt.

Forgiveness is an unnatural act of a will that has been shaped and molded by law from God. There's nothing human about it. Forgiveness does not restore the broken relationship or repair the emotional damage done. It simply writes it off. And it only becomes practically possible to us when we realize what God has forgiven us for. Be humbled by the magnitude of your forgiven debt and you will discover that the unnatural act of forgiveness is possible.

Some Practical Observations About Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness begins with a decision. The process of forgiveness begins with our intellect. Saying the words, "I forgive Lisa for abandoning me and our family," starts a process of forgiveness. The challenge then becomes living that choice. Please know that emotional release, a letting go of pain and hurt, follows the intellectual decision to forgive, not the other way around. Until emotional release is achieved, peace comes in the form of trust. The feeling of peace may occur immediately or gradually; until then it's the promise of peace that keeps us going.
2. Choose to forgive one-off sense at a time. All too often we face a mountain of hurt that cannot be overcome. Make a list of the boulders that comprise that mountain and strive to forgive them individually. Tackle it in manageable pieces.
3. Communicating your forgiveness is optional. For some relief comes just by having made a personal decision to forgive. Others need to communicate their decision to bring closure to the process. Do what's best in your situation.
4. Forgiveness and accountability are not mutually exclusive. We can forgive someone and still hold him or her accountable for his or her actions (not for revenge or personal gain). For example, you can forgive an ex-spouse for driving drunk with your children in the car, but you do not have to then subject your children to future possible harm. Work with your ex and/or the court system to ensure safety (e.g., another person must be present when driving) until your ex is demonstrating more responsible behavior.

5. Forgiveness takes one; trust and reconciliation take two. Mercy can be extended to someone without re-establishing trust. Many resist forgiveness because they believe they will be forced into making themselves vulnerable to the other person again. If a bank employee steals from a bank he can be forgiven, and still not given his job back. There is nothing wrong with learning from your experience with someone and protecting yourself or others from hurt. Just check out your motivations.
6. Forgiveness is empowering. Holding on to hurt and pain enslaves us to the person who hurt us. Conflict and bitterness keep alive our hurt. The result is a helpless victim. Have you ever been guilty of constantly blaming your poor life circumstances on someone else? That's what victims do—constantly complain about how others have ruined their life. In doing so, victims alleviate themselves from personal responsibility for the condition of their life.
7. Forgiveness moves us from a victim to an empowered victor. It breaks the chains of interrupt and severs the umbilical cord that gave life to the pain. When you forgive, you no longer just react to the other out of pain but have free choice to decide the best course of action. For example, an ex-spouse might continue to act as a Fiery Foe, but you do not have to return fire (as in the past). Forgiveness is the key that opens your prison cell door. As an ex-concentration camp victim, Corrie Ten Boom said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you."

Questions for You

While forgiveness is fresh on your mind, take a minute to write a letter answer to the following.

1. What offenses or leftovers from the past do I have before me?
2. Which of these can I decide to forgive today?
3. Decide how you will continue to struggle with the remaining items.
4. What personal acts do I need to repent of or seek forgiveness for?

ACTION POINTS FOR CO-PARENTS

Keep the Goal in Mind Working with an uncooperative ex-spouse is difficult, especially when the ghost of your marriage past begs you to not give the other any credit for the change. On some level, many ex-spouses need to view the other as incapable of change. This leads us to look for evidence that the ex is the same and cannot be trusted; we might also discount evidence to the contrary. Keeping the goal in mind means doing everything you can to be a Cooperative Colleague and remaining open to the possibility that your ex-spouse might change along life's way. When treating children who are members of a post-divorce family or stepfamily, a standard part of my clinical work is to call ex-spouses for a consultation. I generally find them to be much less disagreeable than the other parent assumes they will be. In fact, they are often eager to improve the living conditions for their children. Remember, if you can grow through your divorce and change, so can they.

Be Business-Like if Necessary.

Many co-parents have learned how to handle difficult ex-spouse relationships. Some use note cards while speaking on the phone to help keep them on task. Others avoid personal contact altogether relying on answering machines, letters, and email. No matter what your avenue of communication, treat the contact as you would a business deal. Do not get personal, seek the win/win solution, and stick to discussing the kids. Having a business mentality may help you to avoid being sidetracked when your buttons get pushed.

Guidelines in those critical conversations

From time to time there are critical conversations that take place between the co-parents, and separating our emotions from the purpose of the conversation is extremely important.

Tips to help you have those conversations with your co-parent

1. Ask yourself: "is it extremely critical to have this conversation?"
2. Start the conversation by confirming the co-parent ("Affirm") in the role he / she play in the children's lives and how important he/she is. Focus on the good traits he / she has as a parent.
3. Remove any emotions from the conversation.
4. Be matter-of-fact and give only the facts of the situation.
5. Use "I-Statements"
6. What is your conclusion about the situation?
7. Then ask the co-parent: "what do you suggest we do?"

Questions for All Couples

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 rate your co-parental relationship on your ability to contain anger and conflict to cooperate and compromise on issues regarding the children's welfare.
2. List two or three things you might do to improve this rating.
3. During the first year after remarriage disruptions in the visitation schedule can be quite friends for children.
Regularity of contact is critical to children's self-esteem and reduces more feelings of loss. When a remarriage takes place the visitation routine is often disturbed. Indeed, fathers on average drop their visits to non-custodial children by half within the first year of their ex-wife's remarriage.
What disruptions in access to both parents have your children experienced? What can you do to improve the access and regularity (predictability) of this contact?
4. Consider whether your children have your permission to care for others in their two homes. If not, what needs to change within you to grant that permission?
5. What fears do you have about losing touch with your teenagers? If they wanted to live in the other home, how would you react?
6. Affirm yourself and your ex for the things you are currently doing well.
7. Consider each point in Helping the Children Thrive Between Homes. Which have you already implemented, and which could you adopt now?
8. On a scale of 1-10 how well are you able to compartmentalize old marital issues from current co-parental ones? What triggers are you most susceptible to?
9. Share some of the forgiveness issues you have had to face or are currently struggling to release.
10. Make a list on the left side of unhealthy co-parenting patterns. On the right, list your new plan and how you will respond.

Ways I put my child(ren) in an emotional tug-of-war:

Unhealthy

How to improve:

Expectations put on my child(ren) to take care of me or others:

Unhealthy

How to improve:

What is co-parenting

THE DO'S AND DON'TS

If you are separated or divorced, but want your children to know they're still a priority in both your lives, you're going to want to get very familiar with the principles of co-parenting.

What is co-parenting?

Co-parenting involves putting the wellbeing of your children first, ahead of any hurt feelings or disagreements you may have with your ex.

The goal is to show your kids they're loved by BOTH parents, and to set up some co-parenting ground rules to help bring consistency and stability back into your children's lives.

Successful co-parenting is definitely not an easy task, especially if you're new to the idea. Stress levels post break-up often run high, which can lead to some high-conflict situations. But this is when having a solid co-parenting plan in place is most important.

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