

**Pastoral Family Counseling
Co-Parenting Therapy**



**For Pastors & Chaplains
Training Manual
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Note from the author:

This manual is for training purpose as a guideline to assist Pastors and Chaplains in Pastoral Family Counseling. Use Caution at all times when counseling those in need, for it is a Spiritual Counseling to feed the soul and the hearts. Any and all information given in this manual does not follow any guidelines of a License Professional Family Therapist.

Only as License Ordained Clergical Member which has had certification and is qualified in Pastoral Family Counseling. Not all clerical members are qualified to counsel others and should never attempt to do so for it will lead to more problems that can not handle. Being a Spiritual Counselor is one purpose to lead those in need of guidance, being the peacemaker in finding a solution.

If you try to counsel someone and don't know what you are doing it could backfire on you and you won't accomplish the goals set forth in helping those in need of dealing with co-parenting.

Counsel from the heart, for God will guide you in helping those whom seek the guidance.

For God will provide the answers which you seek. We are Shepherds of Christ, We are never to judge others, that is not our job and the Heavenly Father alone will be our judge.

Where love has seemed to have gone from the family, there is hope through Jesus Christ.

Reduce Conflict:



A family is like a puzzle trying to keep the pieces together and it's the hardest job a parent will ever have in raising a family, but as time goes by things happen and the relationship ends, but should never end with the child. Communication is the up most key in raising the child's best well being. Each parent needs to write down his or her own concerns on what the child needs is and the best way to raise them. Here is a suggestion after they have written down, compare notes and then if either have different idea on just how to raise the child, it would be a good time to communicate to each other.

No matter what the differences you may have with your ex both need to be put aside any differences and make your child first priority in your life.

Over all arguing back and forth in from of the child doesn't help, it just shows the child bitterness and hate. The child sees this and will grow up thinking it's alright to treat others that way. This will be very detrimental to the development of the child's growth.

Children needs for protection from parental conflict must be addressed before the establishment of any co-parenting arrangement after separation, and a full range of supports must be made available to parents in high conflict situations. Within these programs, children needs become a means of connecting the parents in a positive direction at a time when conflict has divided them.

Social institutional support for parents in the implementation of a co-parenting plan is critical, particularly for high-conflict cases where children may be caught in the middle of disputes between parents.

Of all the strategies that can be used by divorcing parents to reduce the harmful effects of divorce on their children, the most important is the development and maintenance of a cooperative co-parenting relationship.

Children adjustment post-divorce in a long-term co-parenting arrangement is facilitated by a meaningful routine relationship with each parent; an absence of hostile comments about the other parent; consistent, safe, structured, and predictable care-giving environments without parenting disruptions; healthy, caring, low-conflict relationships with each parent; and parents' emotional health and well being.

Any model of long-term support for high-conflict divorced families should focus on these factors to produce positive outcomes for children and their parents.

It is particularly important that hostility between parents be minimized following divorce. Currently, in cases where there is ongoing litigation between parents, children are at greater risk of emotional damage than in less contentious circumstances; in many cases, divorce does not end marital conflict, but exacerbates it.

It is important that parents help their children see the good qualities in each of their parents, and that parents work toward the development of positive relationships with each other.

An effective support system is instrumental in providing parents with the necessary skills to deal with co-parenting challenges: the central tenets of this system should be to reduce conflict, assure physical security, provide adequate support services to reduce harm to children and to enable the family to manage its own affairs. In order for such a system to be successful, allied professionals need to be supportive of a model that helps resolve family disputes and focuses on the welfare of the children.

A successful divorce is one in which the parents divorce each other but do not require the child to divorce one of the parents, either as a result of parental conflict or by one parent not being available to the child.

The following quote nicely summarizes this knowledge:

The current research examining the effects of divorce on children concludes that a constructive divorce in a family with children requires minimizing the psychic injury to children through continued relationships with both parents and an atmosphere of support and cooperation between the parents.

Thus, it is a well-established fact that a child experiencing the dissolution of the family structure will do better if the parents are able to get along and reduce trauma in an already traumatic experience. Co-parenting can be a viable option when it is implemented by parents who want it to work because they understand that the child's needs supersede their own self interest, and it can be successful and rewarding for both the child and the parents.

IMPACT OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

There are many threatening and frightening things that happen to individuals whose relationship ends up in separation or divorce. When there are no children of the relationship, the adults can separate their lives relatively easily, albeit not without pain. For a child, however, the termination of a nuclear family is, most often, highly traumatizing. Children, who go through separation, and/or divorce, experience abandonment. Generally, this is also their primary fear. Younger children do not have the intellectual resources, or older children the emotional resources to understand this as anything other than, "I am being left by my parent!" When asked, "What do you worry about most?" They often respond with, "I am afraid I will never see one of my parents again." When children of

separation or divorce are asked, “What are your three wishes?” most will usually say something like, “I wish my Mom and Dad were back together.”

A central reason that divorce is so difficult for children is the fact that they have little life experience to understand why their parents would separate and what happens when a parent, or when both parents, leaves the family home. They frequently worry, “If ONE of my parents mysteriously left home today, who is to say that my OTHER parent won’t leave home tomorrow, and there will be nobody left to take care of me?”

Often, children are afraid to ask what will happen. They are afraid they may hear that their worst fear has come true - that their parents have indeed, permanently abandoned by their parents. And, if the parents do not explain what the separation means and doesn’t mean for the child, then the child may remain in a state of chronic anxiety. Sometimes, this anxiety gets expressed as acting-out with aggressive and non-compliant behavior, and sometimes it gets expressed as withdrawn behavior, eating problems, sleeping problems, and/or school problems. So, if a child’s behavior has changed from a usual pattern, it may simply be a red flag being waved saying, “I’m having difficulty dealing with this situation. Can you please help me by explaining what is going on?” Your child needs you to take time to explain in detail what the separation will mean to him or her. This is an excellent time to reassure your children that the separation and divorce are not their fault. It is not something they said, did, felt, or thought that made Daddy or Mommy leave. Give the child a simple explanation of why the separation did take place. Present it in a way that does not put down the other parent.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

In dealing with a former partner in the joint task of raising children after separation and/or divorce, it is very important, and clearly very challenging to separate the parenting issues from leftover partnering issues.

So how do former partners jointly parent their children? And what is co-parenting? Let us begin by defining some terms and concepts.

LEGAL CUSTODY

Legal custody is a designation of parental authority to make major decisions regarding the health, education, and welfare of the child. Some examples of such issues that need decisions would be as follows: Does the child need braces? What school will the child attend? What religion will the child practice? The typical options for Legal Custody are either Sole legal custody, or Joint legal custody. A parent with Sole legal custody has authority to make all major decisions about the child. Parents with Joint legal custody share the authority to make major decisions about their child.

PHYSICAL CUSTODY

Physical custody designates the amount of time a child shares with each parent. The typical options are Sole physical custody or Joint physical custody. A parent with Sole physical custody has responsibility for the child the significant majority of the time. Parents with Joint physical custody share responsibility for the child's time within a more equitable schedule. It is important to note that neither Joint physical nor Joint legal custody necessarily mean an exactly equal time-sharing arrangement. The legal definitions of these terms have purposely been left general and broad by the legislatures, so that any specific application could take into account the particular needs of a given child and his or her family situation. Any and all time-sharing plans should be based on the very broad standard of "the best

interests of the child.” It should take into consideration the child’s developmental needs.

VISITATION

Another term to define is visitation. This is generally considered to be the time that the child shares with the non-custodial parent. Notice these highlighted terms -custody, visitation. They sound like the child is a piece of property, or a prisoner.

Rather than viewing the separated family arrangements in traditional legal terms, it is more valid, psychologically speaking, for physical custody to be conceptualized from the point of view of the child. We know that, with rare exceptions, it is in the child’s best interest to have regular and continuing contact with both parents. And, with very young children (under the age of 4 or 5), it is important if at all possible to have frequent contact with each parent. This is because of their very limited memory, which after only several days fades the image of the missing parent. This all is to say the child’s rights have to supersede the parent’s rights. It is the child’s right to have access to both parents. It is the parent’s obligation and responsibility to be available and to care for the child.

PARENTING PLAN

Less competitive or “fighting words” and more collaborative terminology would be helpful in lowering the stress of an already difficult situation. For example, rather than using the terms “custody” and “visitation,” I suggest using the more emotionally neutral term, “parenting plan.” This term contains the more normalized concepts of a child sharing time with or living with each parent at different times. In a written parenting plan, sentences begin with, “The child will share time with (or, live with) each parent according to the following schedule:” rather than, “The Father has visitation on alternate weekends.” Even if the child

sees one parent only once a year for a few days, the child is still sharing time and living with that parent during that time period.

The time sharing plan should take into consideration what that child has become accustomed to, regarding the parenting style and arrangement during the time of the intact relationship. This is critical for the adjustment and stability of the child during the often chaotic and stressful period following the break up. If, during the relationship, there had been a primary parent carrying out the major responsibility in time and effort, then such should remain the initial basis of a parenting plan. It need not remain as such forever, but it should begin with the status quo from the child's view, and be modified gradually over time. It is important to understand that no agreement is written in stone. All parenting plans are negotiable, as various needs arise that necessitate modification of the plan.

If a child is to be with one parent significantly more of the time than with the other parent (for example, when the two parents live a considerable distance from one another), I suggest replacing the traditional term of "custodial parent" with the less emotionally charged concept of "the child's primary residence" and "the child's secondary residence." Of course, if the child shares time fairly equitably between the parents, then there is no need to designate either parent's residence with such title.

CO-PARENTING

Technically, co-parenting exists with any parenting arrangement, regardless of its formal designation. In whatever way each parent is involved in raising the child, the parents co-parent. Most effective co-parenting arrangements contain the following characteristic dynamics between the parents: cooperation, communication, compromise, and consistency. These dynamics often grow over time and typically take a period of years to evolve effectively.

PARALLEL PARENTING

While meaningful co-parenting can only be carried out by parents in a working, functional, parental relationship, parallel parenting is more characteristic of parents in a dysfunctional relationship dynamic. Parallel parenting manifests when there is an insufficient degree of cooperation, communication, compromise, or consistency to carry out co-parenting. Frequently, in the beginning stages of a separation or divorce, parallel parenting may exist as a result of the lack of trust and sense of betrayal. While most parents are able to work through these dynamics to establish a more cooperative relationship, some parents are not and they remain in a power struggle that affects all negotiations between them. Certainly, when post-divorce parenting arrangements are Court-ordered in an adversarial court battle, such on-going patterns are common.

Children in parallel parenting arrangements often experience heightened anxiety during phone calls from the other parent and during transfers between parents. This anxiety results from the child's awareness of the great potential for parental fights to ensue at these times. It is important to protect the children from this potential for parental conflict to erupt. Minimizing verbal and physical contact between the parents can help. It is often useful to utilize written communication (letters, faxes, e-mail, etc.), or a third party, for communication purposes.

FIVE CATEGORIES OF POST-DIVORCE SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIPS

Conceptualized five categories of post-divorce spousal relationships: Perfect Pals, Cooperative Colleagues, Angry Associates, Fiery Foes, and Dissolved Duos. The first two are appropriately referred to as functional co-parenting. The next two are dysfunctional relationships that can manage "parallel parenting" at best. And, the last category, Dissolved Duos, sadly for the children, consists of 100% solo parenting.

PERFECT PALS

Perfect Pals are best friends who were married and have made a mutual decision to go their separate ways. These parents like one another. They usually do all their own legal work and establish a parenting plan that is in the “best interests of the child.” They are flexible and have respect for each other, both as co-parents and as friends. These are the individuals who will be able to celebrate holidays together. Even after remarriage to others, they may, for example, all celebrate Thanksgiving dinner together. When graduation comes, they might purchase one present together for their child and sit together at the ceremony.

COOPERATIVE COLLEAGUES

While still within the co-parenting category, Cooperative Colleagues have a difficult time when they separate. They most likely have attorneys or require a third party to assist in finalizing plans of the marital settlement. Most often these people did not make a mutual decision to separate. They still do not necessarily like each other, but they respect one another as parents. They can separate their parenting from their partnering issues. They support the child’s involvement in each other’s lives and in the lives of the extended families. They are generally courteous to each other. A few times a year, they may have a disagreement that initially will require third party intervention, but they are able to resolve such disputes outside of Court.

Eventually, cooperative colleagues figure out how to avoid getting caught up in the drama of the former partner. At graduation, for example, they may or may not sit together. Either way, they are cordial and not overtly hostile. They will likely feel more comfortable purchasing separate gifts for their child and one might take the graduate to dinner while the other takes him or her to breakfast. These people have let go of each other. They permit and support the child having a relationship with the other parent. As years move on, each is less threatened by the other. The

child has two houses and two families under one large conceptual family umbrella.

Now, we move into the more dysfunctional post-divorce relationship categories. Although many still refer to this as co-parenting, I suggest the use of the more apt term, “parallel parenting,” to describe these dynamics.

ANGRY ASSOCIATES

Angry Associates do not know how to emotionally disengage from each other. They are “compatible combatants.”³ They fight well together and thus remain in a destructive relationship from which at least one of the parties was truly attempting to leave. At least one of the partners gets stuck in the emotional process of divorce and cannot move on with life. This can go on for years or, perhaps, a lifetime. These parents are in a persistent and continual power struggle with one another. They regularly require third party intervention (mediators, lawyers, arbitrators, and judges). They do not respect each other as parents, nor as people. Their child becomes a pawn in this unrelenting conflict and his or her childhood is sacrificed to the immaturity of the parents. These are the parents who do not encourage the child to share time with the other parent. Involvement with extended family members is not often a real possibility for the child.

Certainly, if looks could cause harm, injury would happen, (and occasionally does) between these parents. They will definitely choose not to sit near one another at any of their child’s events. More than likely, the parent responsible for the child on graduation day will not encourage the child to acknowledge the other parent, in any way. These parents do not understand that, although they have separated or divorced, the child does not choose to divorce either parent. Unfortunately, these parents see things in black and white, win/lose, and either/or. There is no gray, no win-win in their consciousness. This child will

grow up walking on eggshells and scanning the environment to figure out the “right” thing to say and do. The child’s base of operation is one of living in a “war zone.” This child cannot be the loving center of his/her parents’ world. This child exists as the “spoils of war.”

FIERY FOES

The next relationship category, called the Fiery Foes, is one in which the dynamics of the dysfunctional relationship further exacerbate the intensity of the dissolution process. These parents have such disdain for one another that, for example, one of the parents cannot even attend the child’s graduation. Not only does each parent dislike the other, but the child and the eventual grandchild will have to carry the anger down through the generations as to how awful the other parent was as a parent, partner, and yes, human being. The therapist of this child can do nothing more than comfort the child during the therapy sessions. For, after these sessions, the child must return to the family war. The children of these parents suffer psychopathology of the worst order, distress that will assure them of the need for life-long psychotherapy. Often the risks (both physical and emotional) to the child of on-going efforts by their parents at co-parenting are too great. Decisive and sometimes dramatic Court intervention is a virtual necessity with Fiery Foes.

DISSOLVED DUOS

The final category is Dissolved Duos. These parents have reached such an extreme point of pain that one of the parents drops out of the child’s life entirely. The parent typically moves out of state and begins a new family, often never even telling the new spouse that there had ever been another family. This parent would not have even known that their child had graduated. Becoming the departing of the Dissolved Duo is one way to disengage from the emotional pain of divorce, but the price that the child pays in being abandoned is huge.

THE IMPACT OF GRIEF ON SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING

Most parents want to co-parent successfully and strive to conduct themselves in ways that would include them in the first two post-divorce relationship categories. What gets in the way?

THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Just as with death, when a relationship ends there is a grieving process. This natural response to loss often contributes significantly to difficulties in co-parenting. It takes no less than two years to bring the grieving process regarding the break up of the relationship to a resolution. This timeline is founded on the notion that a person needs to live through the first year after the break up with all its holidays and occasions, as he or she moves away from the established patterns of the marital relationship. The second year permits the creation of new patterns. It should not be assumed that a new relationship cannot be established during the grieving period. It is just that unresolved issues from the prior relationship often interfere with the new relationship. Ghosts of the previous relationship frequently intrude, unconsciously, into the dynamics of a new relationship and often contribute to its problems. Frequently, the grief process takes much longer than two years. One theory suggests that the grieving process can take as long as one-third to one-half the length of the relationship that just ended.

The grieving process has many theoretical models. One stage-theory that is very useful was developed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.⁴ The first stage is the stage of denial - the disbelief that this is actually happening. The second stage is the stage of anger. This can take many forms, which include conflict, rage, acting out and redefining the former partner in as negative a light as possible. Johnston⁵ has termed this tendency the “negative reconstruction of the spousal identity.” In this phenomenon, all the attributes that initially attracted one to the former partner are now attributes that are repulsive. It is a way for a spouse to emotionally

disengage. As examples: “He is such a good provider,” becomes “He is such a workaholic.” “She is such a free spirit,” becomes “She is such a flake.” “He is so well informed,” becomes, “He is so opinionated.” Sound familiar?

The third stage, of grieving, according to Kubler-Ross, involves remorse or bargaining. In this stage, one is frightened about really losing the other. Promises and deals are made that positive changes will happen if only they can get back together.

The fourth stage is the phase of depression. There is deep pain and sadness about the loss of the dreams, fantasies, expectations, and hopes.

Finally the last stage, acceptance, is one which involves moving on in life. It has been our experience that you know you have reached the acceptance stage when someone, inquiring about your relationship, asks, “What happened?” And, your response, given in less than ten seconds and void of emotional charge, is “We just went our separate ways.”

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

It is often the case that one parent is at a more functional level than is the other with regard to co-parenting. If this is the situation, then it is more effective for the parent who is at the more functional level to remain rational and empathic toward the other parent. If the more functional parent is drawn to a lower level of functionality, there will be more chaos and disruption, not only for that parent, but, more importantly, for the child. The higher functioning parent would be better off learning effective negotiating skills for dealing with an individual who prefers to be in a competitive rather than collaborative negotiating arena. Do not expect the separation or divorce to magically change the pattern of the other party from how it was during the marriage to being more effective in resolving

problems. Without active new learning, it is unusual for such patterns to change on its own. Individual counseling and classes in communication skills are productive resources for the higher functioning parent.

IMPACT ON THE INDIVIDUAL'S ABILITY TO "MOVE ON"

There is yet another concept to address that impacts the ability to co-parent. The emotional process of divorce for one partner is not generally on the same timeline as it is for the other partner. Typically, one of the partners becomes aware of being unhappy in the relationship. That individual may request the other to attend marital counseling in hopes of getting the other partner to change and make the relationship "right." The other partner may respond with something like, "I don't have a problem. You have a problem. You go to counseling. I am very happy just the way things are."

The person attempting to seek professional help is already well into the process of emotional detachment. The less effort exerted by the other partner, the more such detachment occurs. The interesting aspect here is that the first party experiences interactions with the spouse as a constant, daily reality check regarding the unhappy experience. This validates the perception that the relationship is no longer functional. Typically, this internal process of detachment goes on for about a year or two before the decision to separate is made. Once the decision is made to leave the relationship, there typically is little or no chance of reclaiming the relationship. And, on the day that the first partner announces that the relationship is over, the grieving process for the second party begins. It is this timeline disparity that creates turmoil between the couple.

At that point, the person who is being left says, "Okay, let's go to counseling and fix this!" Frequently, the intent of such a request is to have the counselor tell the leaving party that he or she is in error and should stay and work it out. When this

does not happen as hoped, the partner who is left begins the emotional process of divorce. Once separated, the grieving process of the person who was left is somewhat different and more difficult than that of the one who left. Now, the only base of perception is the memory of the relationship, not the reality of the day-to-day experience. And, those memories can rapidly become grossly distorted. Once again, individual counseling for the person being left can be of tremendous help in providing support, and can be a reality check for clearer thinking and more appropriate planning.

ESTABLISHING A PARENTING PLAN: THE NUTS AND BOLTS THINGS TO CONSIDER

For co-parenting to be effective, both parents need to consider the needs of the child above their own needs. A written parenting plan provides the structure necessary to get through a difficult time. It is like a map that gives directions on how the two of you agree to parent your child. This structured agreement offers the basis of security upon which the former spouses can build trust. A parenting plan should be built on a foundation of the developmental needs of the child. It is often useful to seek sound professional advice about the needs of children at different ages in devising a parenting plan.

It should be understood that what is appropriate for a child at a certain age will not necessarily be appropriate for the same child at a later age. The child's temperament and response to changes should be addressed and monitored. For example, how adaptable is your child? How easily can he or she handle changes? How sensitive to stimuli is he? How much does she need a highly structured routine? How distractible is he?

Also the child's sense of time is an important factor in considering the duration a child can cope with separation from a parent. For example, young children (under

five years of age or so) have only about a three-day memory for an absent parent. After about three days with no contact with the other parent (including no phone contact), these children may begin to show distress, because they have begun to “forget” the other parent, and thus they may feel abandoned. As children get older, they can handle increased time away from each parent. These facts, of course, mean that an agreement cannot be permanent but rather is always only temporary, good and useful only until the child and/or the circumstances change. A parenting plan should include a regular school year schedule, a summer schedule, and a holiday schedule. Consistency, especially in the initial phases of the arrangement is important. Once an agreement is reached the less there is to negotiate and the more that trust can be established between the parents. This is beneficial, since ultimately, it will likely nurture more flexibility between the parties.

The day-to-day parenting plan should take into consideration the reality of the child. For example, if the child is young, and/or has awareness that one of the parents has been the primary source of parenting, then such would be the starting point of the negotiated agreement. Gradual shifts from what is familiar to the child to what is possible are best for children. To alter this too suddenly would be more about meeting the needs of the adults than of the child. The child is then forced to sacrifice his or her needs, rather than the parents more appropriately making sacrifices for their child.

Responsibilities can be negotiated (for example, who will take the child to medical appointments, purchase clothing, etc.). Such responsibilities can be shared or specifically assigned to one parent, but it should be acknowledged in the agreement. If the parents have a comfortable level of communication, the flexibility to modify the agreement can be accomplished through mutual consent. If there is difficulty communicating, then it is more effective to keep the

agreement structured, with little modification. Of course, it is helpful to specify how minor modifications can be made when a legitimate need arises (e.g., when one parent is tied up in traffic and does not make it on time to a scheduled transfer of the child; or, for example, when a child is very sick and transfer to the other parent is medically inadvisable).

It is also useful to set out specific guidelines for communication. These may include when, for how long, and how frequently the parents agree to talk business with one another regarding financial matters, legal matters, etc. Also, specified time should be set aside to discuss the children. It is critically important that these discussions NOT take place in earshot of the children. Such negotiations can frequently lead to conflict and even minor conflict in front of the children of separation and divorce can be distressing to the children.

Co-parenting can work more smoothly if there is a color-coded calendar at each home. Each parent is represented by a particular color. In this way, even young children who cannot yet recognize letters can still associate one color with Mommy, and a different color with Daddy. Consistency of the color assignment across households facilitates comfort in recognition for a young child.

Anchoring certain concepts to specific events is also useful for a young child. For example, you can say, "You will be seeing Mommy (or Daddy) after you go to sleep three times," then "two times," then "one time." A young child does not really understand what a "Tuesday" is, nor what "next weekend" means. Young children are concrete thinkers. It helps a child to adjust if there is a picture of the other parent in the room where the child sleeps. That way, the memory of the other parent can be sustained in the child's mind for a longer time between transfers.

Open phone access of the child with each parent is helpful, as long as neither parent is stressing the child. The call should be a special event and solely for the purpose of speaking with the children. It is most useful to not request to speak to the other parent when you call to speak to the child. Arguments that can ensue when you ask to speak to the other parent are experienced by the child as “my parents are arguing over me.” Of course, it is most helpful to teach the child how to call the other parent, without the need of parental assistance. Speed dial buttons on phones are perfect for young children doing this.

Similarly, during transfers of the child, be civil and brief, saying, “Hello,” “Thank you,” “Good bye.” Again, it is best to avoid discussing adult matters (money, schedules, lawyers, etc.) during transfer of the child.

If it is economically feasible, the child should have sufficient clothing and toys at both houses. This avoids the child feeling like a traveler carrying luggage. If possible, arrange to transfer the child at school or at childcare. One parent drops off; the other picks up. This tends to reduce the child’s separation anxiety that results from leaving one parent to go directly with the other. Being a co-parent requires a great deal of skill. This includes the ability to listen and to avoid getting defensive. The ability to let your former partner parent the child his or her own way is a skill. It need not be perfect, or as good as your parenting style, but it just has to be good enough. It helps to understand that the child can benefit from what each of you has to offer. It is a skill to present a concern and let the other parent deal with it as he or she sees best.

It is helpful for both parents to comprehend that they are in a joint business enterprise. Their business is to raise their child and provide the necessary skills for this child to grow into a productive member of society. That does not require you to like each other or to want to spend time together. It just requires an

understanding that, for the sake of the child, you let go of the animosity and resentment towards each other, and let your child love each of you.

EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

There are four stages in the evolution of a relationship from a beginning romance and/or marriage towards a divorce and co-parenting relationship. The first is the stage of “intimacy.” This is when you get together, are in love, and the world looks fine. The second stage may best be termed “negative intensity.” This is when the relationship is falling apart and separation and divorce are in the works. The third is the stage of “building a structured agreement” for how to continue raising the children in the context of separation or divorce. In this stage, the parents must form a business-like relationship and clarify the time-scheduling plan for the children and the rules of conduct for how the parents agree to conduct themselves after separation and divorce.

The last is the stage of “emotional disengagement.” It is in this stage that you reassess and establish a post-divorce relationship with each other, which can range from Perfect Pals to Dissolved Duos. Hopefully you will end up, minimally, as Cooperative Colleagues, being courteous and civil in your interactions with one another. Unfortunately, many divorcing parents try to move directly from stage two to stage four without going through stage three. Bypassing stage three (building a structured agreement) does not allow for the necessary tasks of structuring a co-parenting agreement that prevents the children from being used as pawns between the parents as they continue to act on their negative feelings towards one another. This, unfairly, puts further stress on the child, and it should be avoided.

Divorce and separation do not automatically result in the parents realizing that now they must work together differently from how they did when they were

together. Do not expect miracles. Your former partner is not going to wake up all of a sudden and say, “Oh gee, now I understand what s/he wanted. I will act appropriately.” A parenting plan is a map. It is a map of how the two parents will continue to raise their child. However, just as a road map does not teach you HOW to drive the car safely on the road, but merely shows you the territory, the parenting map simply describes in detail the territory of co-parenting. You are solely responsible for your own behavior in following this map. The more communication and parenting skills you pick up along the way, the safer the journey will be for your children.

Developing understanding and empathy for the other parent are essential in using the map effectively. You can still have accidents, despite the map that you create. Individual counseling, or some other guided experience in self-awareness can be a benefit to you in relating to your former partner. Oftentimes, individual counseling is very effective in figuring out your own boundaries. If both individuals are willing, divorce counseling aimed at learning communication skills can be very helpful for untangling the old emotional hooks and learning effective ways to co-parent, for your child’s sake.

Imagining The Future

Imagine that you are attending your child’s twenty-fifth birthday, or wedding. Will your child be able to look at the two of you on this day of celebration and say the following? “I would like to honor my Mom and Dad for their love of me. They were able to navigate through a difficult situation and protect me from the storm. I love you both for showing me how to be a human being.” Or, will your child look out and not see one or either of you there, because of your unresolved anger towards each other?

A child has the right to love both parents. Give your child that as a gift. It will be profoundly appreciated and everlasting.

Co-Parenting Support:

There are six key components of a longer-term co-parenting support model for high-conflict parents:

- Whereas education on the impact of divorce on children both in the short and term should be provided to parents prior to the development of a co-parenting plan, reinforcement and enhancement of pre-divorce education should take place in a structured format post-divorce.
- In addition to negotiating a workable parenting plan that meets the needs of children and delineates the responsibilities of parents, monitoring the consistency of the care-giving environments post-divorce is critical.
- Although direct contact between highly conflicted parents may not be strictly necessary in successful co-parenting, as parents can share parenting responsibilities within a parallel parenting arrangement, it seems clear that some form of intervention to mend the relationship between parents would contribute to the long-term success of the co-parenting arrangement. This intervention would focus on the development of positive interactions between family members, enhancing communication skills, developing a range of problem-solving skills, and enhancing non-aggressive negotiation skills.
- Long-term counseling should be made available to children alone and to each parent and each child together during and after divorce.
- Long-term success of co-parenting is achieved through emotional healing post-divorce. Measures should be taken to allow each member of the family to gain an increased understanding and acceptance of the divorce as time goes by.
- Finally, regular reviews of the co-parenting plan at pre-specified periods are useful during the implementation of the plan. These reviews should take into

consideration developmental changes in the children as well as structural changes in the family such as the introduction of a new partner and stepparent, relocation, and children changing developmental needs. These reviews should be conducted by a family mediator who can re-open the co-parenting plan for revision or modification as needed.

Parenting Coordination. A relatively new intervention for high conflict couples is that of parenting or dispute resolution coordination, which assists parents to settle post-divorce disputes, facilitates compliance with co-parenting plans and orders, and provides case management services, parent education, coaching, mediation, and arbitration of child-related conflicts as they arise. Although empirical evidence of the effectiveness of parenting coordination is just beginning to be obtained, initial research results are encouraging.

Parallel parenting. For intractable high conflict situations, the option of parallel parenting exists, in which parents remain disengaged from each other, and may assume decision-making responsibility in different domains (such as one parent being responsible for medical decisions and the other for education).

Parallel parenting protects children from parental conflict while protecting their relationships with both parents. Such arrangements call for a high degree of specificity in the initial parenting plan, per-empting the need for parents to communicate directly once the plan is in place. Many parents achieve cooperative co-parenting from a place of initial disengagement.

Best Interest of the Child:

When you are deciding on parenting arrangements, it's important to focus on the best interests of your children. While there is no precise definition of the "best interests of the child", one way to think about it is to consider what parenting arrangement will best encourage your children's development, happiness and success.

This isn't an easy question to answer, as it will depend on many factors. Every child and family is different and so it's important to think about what will work best in your situation. Try to look at this through your child's eyes.

In deciding on a parenting arrangement, you'll want to consider issues like:

The age and stage of development of your children:

How Children React at Different Ages and Stages.

- Any special needs your children may have
- Your children's relationship with each parent
- Your children's relationship with siblings, grandparents and other extended family
- Care arrangements before the separation
- Your children's wishes
- Each parent's parenting abilities

The ability of you and the other parent to cooperate and communicate about parenting issues.

Your children's cultural, linguistic and religious upbringing.

I would suggest that when we talk about the “best interests” of children, we should be primarily concerned with their essential needs, helping children grow and develop, and achieve their capabilities to the maximum extent possible. Needs are the nutriments or conditions essential to a child’s growth and integrity and for every need there is a corresponding responsibility.

In the realm of parenting after divorce, a truly child-focused approach positions children needs at the forefront of “best interests” considerations, along with corresponding parental and social institutional responsibilities to these needs.

If it can be demonstrated that certain living arrangements, such as shared parenting, best address children core needs, this provides a compelling argument for adopting these arrangements as the legal standard. Indeed, it is the responsibility of social institutions, including public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, to support such arrangements.

It is children of separated parents that are perhaps most vulnerable to not getting their essential needs met, for two main reasons. First, parents are going through multiple losses, transitions and crises, and as a result are relatively insensitive to their children needs. Second, parents are largely left unsupported in regard to these transitions, and in the fulfillment of their responsibilities to their children needs, and children ultimately pay the price.

For every need of children there is a corresponding responsibility. I suggest that a new approach a responsibility-to-needs orientation to children best interests is vital to the future well being of children of separation and divorce.

And it is the responsibility of social institutions such as the courts to support parents in the fulfillment of their parenting responsibilities to their children needs, and not to undermine them, which is exactly what is happening to children within the present adversarial, “winner-take-all” approach.

Although current legal policy and practice emphasizes the primacy of the “best interest of the child” as a criterion in child custody determination, within an adversarial rights-based system, children essential needs are often overlooked, and their safety, security and primary attachment relationships are placed at risk.

The hostility that results from the adversarial process and the loss of a parent as a primary caregiver are the strongest predictors of poor outcomes for children.

The very definition of “the best interest of the child” differs markedly between children and parents on the one hand, and legal practitioners and the judiciary on the other, Judges focus on parental deficits when determining the “best interest of the child”

Parents define: “best interests” in terms of children needs and their own capacities to meet these needs.

Parental views on children essential needs have been the focus of much of my own empirical studies of children in separated families. I found that although parents identified children physical needs, in the great majority of cases, children emotional, psychological, social, moral and spiritual needs were seen to be of paramount importance.

Contrary to the views of some judiciary, parents indicate that children primary need is the active and responsible involvement of both parents in their lives, even

in cases of high parental conflict. Correspondingly, the great majority of parents favors a legal presumption of shared parental responsibility in contested cases.

The research on children and divorce has identified a wide range of factors affecting children adjustment to the consequences of divorce. Principal among these are children needs for the maintenance of meaningful parental relationships with and the love of both of their parents; being shielded from ongoing parental conflict and family violence; stability in their daily routines; and financial security. All of these are severely compromised in the context of adversarial divorce.

An alternative approach to the “best interest of the child” is being advanced today that suggests that our starting point for ensuring justice for children of separated parents should be a covenant or charter of parental and social institutional responsibilities to children essential needs.

Primary among these responsibilities is to ensure that children needs for the maintenance of meaningful parental relationships with and the love of both of their parents, being shielded from ongoing parental conflict and family violence, and stability in their daily routines are protected.

The starting point of such a covenant or charter is the enumeration of the essential needs of children of children after parental separation. Physical needs are perhaps the easiest to identify: food, warmth, sleep, health, rest, exercise, fresh air.

Psychological, social, moral and spiritual needs, on the other hand, are a little more ambiguous, yet no less essential for the well being of children of divorce. It is these “metaphysical” needs of children.

When parents are asked about the essential needs of their children during and after parental separation, children emotional, psychological, social, moral and

spiritual needs are seen to be of paramount importance. But what exactly are these “metaphysical” needs? Can we enumerate these needs and thereby establish a more precise definition of the “best interests of the child”?

According to parents, a major concern in regard to children adjustment to parental separation relates to the chaos and upheaval that occurs during divorce. Order is thus the first essential metaphysical need of children of divorce.

A stable environment provides a sense of constancy, predictability, routine and continuity, essential to child well being.

Children should never be caught in loyalty conflicts between their parents, and need to be assured that the care and nurture of each of their parents will not be interrupted.

Shared parenting, inasmuch as it maintains the involvement of both parents in children lives, and reflects as closely as possible children existing relationships and routines, best addresses children need for order and stability during and after divorce.

Inasmuch as parents are able to maintain a stable environment for their children, and limit upheaval in their living arrangements, they are respecting children need for order and stability.

Increasingly parents are seeking novel solutions such as “bird nesting” arrangements where it is parents that rotate in and out of the family home, rather than children shuttling back and forth between two households, in the interests of children maintaining a stable home base, preserving their relationships with their friends and trusted neighbors, and staying in the same schools; all of these measures maintain order and limit upheaval in children lives.

Protection and guidance is a second core need of children: maintaining safety and protection from physical and emotional harm. Again, shared parenting works effectively in addressing this need, when abuse and family violence are not present.

Shared parenting decreases parental conflict and prevents first-time post-separation family violence, as parents threatened by the loss of their children and their parental identity battle years after their actual physical separation.

One important point that is often overlooked in regard to children safety and protection is the conundrum of courts getting it wrong and granting primary residence to parents who are abusive; this is the worst of all possible outcomes for children.

Courts sometimes err in awarding sole custody to parents who perform well in an adversarial forum, who are “good litigants,” and are able to “win” “ownership” of their children by making allegations and hostile attributions toward the other parent, convincing the court that they are superior caregiver. Highly litigious parties in court do not necessarily make the best parents.

Without full fact-finding and investigation by competent child welfare authorities, family law judges are limited in their ability to identify child abuse and neglect. Abuse is often hidden, and parents who are skilled in adversarial combat are also skilled in covering up abuse, including parental alienation. Shared parenting ensures that there is at least one non-abusive parent in the child’s life.

Autonomy, the freedom and ability to choose, is a third essential need of children. Shared parenting respect children’s need for autonomy because it applies the

principle of the best interests of the child from the perspective of the child and respects children preference for shared parenting arrangements.

This does not mean that we allow young children to decide their living arrangement after separation, as having to choose between parents forces children into a loyalty conflict, which can be extremely harmful to their well being.

Young children in particular do not have the maturity to make such informed choices on their own behalf. Rather, living arrangements should be based on empirical data on what children themselves identify as in their needs and best interests.

And there is ample data from young adult children of divorce reflecting on their needs as children growing up in separated households that children want to spend roughly equal amounts of time with each of their parents after separation, and consider shared parenting to be in their best interests. In this way shared parenting respects children needs for choice in their living arrangements, and policies and practices should be informed by what children themselves identify as their core needs.

Equality is a fourth essential need of children, and part of this is respecting the needs of children of divorce on par with children whose parents are living together. Shared parenting respects children need for equality, in a way that sole residence does not. Children of separated parents who are not in shared residence situations are discriminated against on the basis of parental status, in regard to the removal of one of their parents from their lives.

Whereas a strict legal standard is applied in regard to the removal of a parent from the life of a child non-separated families (the child in need of protection standard—parents are only removed when a finding is made that a child is in need

of protection from a parent in substantiated neglect and abuse situations), an indeterminate approach the discretionary best interests of the child standard is applied in the removal of parents from children lives in separated families.

This runs counter to children need for equality and non-discrimination, as well as the non-discrimination provisions of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Freedom of opinion and expression is another essential need. The voice of the child must be taken into consideration and respected. As with children need for autonomy, this does not mean that we allow young children to choose or decide their living arrangements after separation. Rather, living arrangements should again be based on empirical data from child-focused research. In this way shared parenting respects children voice, and preserves freedom of expression as a fundamental need of children.

The need for truth is, in many ways, a more important need than any other.

This requires that what we know about the effects of different post-separation living arrangements be universally accessible to family members, and not be remote to them or distorted. The need for truth calls for protection against error and lies.

Inasmuch as shared parenting as a preferred arrangement for children is based on solid empirical data that demonstrates its salutary effects on child well-being, it provides a standard for decision-making that limits the discretionary power of courts to make decisions based on idiosyncratic biases and subjective, value-based judgments.

Sole custody and primary residence-based decision-making runs counter to the need for truth, as information that is presented in court, with each party

downplaying his or her own character flaws and smearing the character of the other party, is thrice contaminated: first by the client when advising his or her lawyer; second by the lawyer when preparing and presenting the case; and third by the judge who reads or retains selectively what is presented in court.

Cases are largely decided by the way evidence is presented in court, and thus the determination of the best interests of the child is subject to judicial error. “Truth is the first casualty of war,” and battles over the custody and residence of children are among the most bitter battle wages in court today.

Honor and respect for the inherent dignity of children is another essential need. Honor encompasses being respected and valued within one’s social context, and being free from oppression. The fact that children are minors should never imply any difference in the degree of respect and honor that they are owed as human beings. In children we find an essential humanity, that is most visible in early childhood - a playful, intelligent, and creative way of being.

Honor entails seeing children for the creatively intelligent people they are, respecting their humanity, recognizing them as essential members of the community, and providing the fundamental nurturance they need in order to flourish.

Respectful love is key. It speaks to the need to respect children as whole people and to encourage them to know their own voices. Children need the kind of love that sees them as legitimate beings, persons in their own right. Respectful love fosters self-worth and is a prime nutrient in human development.

Shared parenting honors what children have told us they need and want as far as post-separation living arrangements are concerned. Children need both parents, as they see themselves as made up of half their mother and half their father. Any

disparagement of one or the other parent is thus an attack against the child's very essence, his sense of self-worth, and dishonors the child.

Responsibility is another vital human need. Initiative and responsibility, to feel useful and even indispensable, are vital to children well being. For this need to be satisfied self-efficacy is central: the ability to make decisions in matters affecting oneself, and contribute to decisions in one's social environment.

As children grow and develop, they should be encouraged to take responsibility, and shared parenting addresses this need as well. As children developmental needs and circumstances change, as they grow and develop, shared parenting allows for living arrangements in accordance with children age and stage of development, with frequent alternations between parents in the early years, all the way to adolescents having much more self-determination about their living schedules.

Security, the feeling of safety, is another need. Fear and terror are extremely harmful to children well being; security and a sense of safety are thus vitally important.

Safe environments foster a child's feeling of security and belonging. The very young need protection from the toxic influences that permeate modern life from domestic neglect and maltreatment to the corporate manipulations of their minds to the poisonous chemicals gaining access to their bodies.

Shared parenting provides children with the safety and security of having their relationships with each of their parents fully protected, and provides them with additional protection from toxic influences in their lives.

At the same time, risk is a core need of children, and being shielded from over-protection and boredom. The complete absence of risk is also harmful. Shared

parenting exposes children to two different lifestyles and parenting styles, so that they are much more likely to have a balance between security and protection on the one hand, and risk and excitement on the other.

Privacy and solitude, and confidentiality, are vital needs. Shared parenting spares children the intrusion of courts that place children in the middle of often bitter and publicly displayed conflicts between their parents.

At the same time social life and social connection are vital to children well being. Community involvement and participation in the collective allows children to flourish, to have a sense of belonging in a larger social milieu, and to develop a personal investment in their surrounding community.

Caring community refers to the "village" it takes to raise a child. The community can positively affect the lives of its children. Child-friendly shopkeepers, family resource centers, green schoolyards, bicycle lanes, and pesticide free parks are some of the ways a community can support its young. Shared parenting exposes children to a much wider social network than is possible in sole custody situations, and thus addresses children need for social life and social connection.

The need for roots (attachment bonds and nurturing relationships; love, belonging, connectedness to family, language, religion, culture, neighborhood, community, region, and country) may well be the most neglected need of children of divorce.

A sense of belonging within various "natural environments" such as family and community is perhaps the most neglected human need in general in contemporary society, a tragic circumstance of materialism and modern consumerism in which individuals are disconnected from the milieus in which humans have naturally participated, and through which we live as moral, intellectual, and spiritual beings.

Attachment bonds and nurturing relationships, a sense of belonging and conceitedness, are vital needs. Everything, which has the effect of uprooting a human being or of preventing one from becoming rooted, is extremely damaging. Shared parenting preserve children relationships with both parents, and as such best address children need for roots.

Co-Parenting Arrangements - A bird's nest:

Co-parenting arrangement is one that is uniquely child-centered. Rather than the children having to adapt to the parents' needs and living in two separate dwellings, they remain in the family home and the parents take turns moving in and out, like birds alighting and departing the "nest." During the time parents are not at home with the kids, they live in a separate dwelling, which can either be on their own or rotated with the other parent.

It is a novel yet sensible arrangement, as children experience much less disruption in their lives and routines than having to shuttle and adapt to completely new living arrangements. It can be either a semi-permanent or temporary arrangement, to allow children a smoother transition to life as a divorced family.

Clearly, bird nesting will work for some but not all parents. A bird's nest arrangement will only work if parents live in close proximity, or are able to be in the family home when it is their turn for parenting the kids. It works best when parents are co-parenting, as opposed to one parent being a full-time caregiver with the other a "visiting" parent.

The expense involved is another factor, depending on whether parents arrange for one or two residences away from the family home. If the former, bird nesting need not be any more expensive than parents living in two separate households need. It may even be less expensive than maintaining two homes for the children,

as the external residence may be much more modest if the children are not residing there; a one-bedroom apartment or studio is likely to provide more than enough space.

In addition, parents do not have to purchase two sets of toys and clothing for the children as they would if children are rotating between two households.

If a parent has a child of the opposite sex living within their residence than that child needs their own room to sleep in and not sharing a bed with their Mama or Daddy's room. A child need's their own room they can call their own and sleep in. When the child has their own room they will feel they are home.

If parents opt to maintain two different residences apart from the family home, they have to factor in the additional expense; the cost of maintaining three residences will be prohibitive for many.

Finally, bird nesting while sharing one residence in addition to the family home is extremely challenging when new partners appear on the scene. In particular, privacy may become a serious issue of concern for one or both parents, since the other parent's on going presence is obvious and unavoidable.

Bird nesting works best when parents are able to separate their co-parenting responsibilities from their previous marital conflicts, and remain amicable and cooperative as they confer about continuing household arrangements and the children needs.

Both need to be prepared to maintain a certain level of consistency of purpose, discipline, and child-raising techniques to make it work well; this means being able to communicate clearly and peacefully rather than taking each discussion as an opportunity to argue.

Household and house maintenance arrangements, and ground rules must be absolutely clear, and each parent must closely stick to the agreed-upon arrangements; over time, as they settle into the new lifestyle, more flexible arrangements are possible.

A clearly drafted co-parenting plan or negotiated schedule at the outset is essential. Ongoing mutual respect is vital; and although it is reasonable to assume that there will be arguments or disagreements about various aspects of the arrangement, it is critical that children are shielded from ongoing conflict.

Often, this form of co-parenting will end when the youngest child reaches the age of majority, at which time one parent may either buy the other out of their interest in the family home, or it is sold and the proceeds divided pursuant to the matrimonial property regime or separation agreement.

A bird's nest arrangement is about ensuring that children lives are minimally disrupted, while the adults, who are theoretically more able to cope with the disruption, bear the brunt of the changes. Children are reassured to know that even though their parents are divorcing, they will be able keep the routine, continuity, and permanency to which they are accustomed.

They remain in the family home, their school and neighborhood friendships can continue uninterrupted, and of course they are able to maintain meaningful relationships with both parents, which is crucial to their ongoing well being.

Parents who opt for this type of living arrangement are to be commended, as they are clearly placing their children needs and their responsibilities to those needs above their own interests. And the level of discomfort they are likely to

experience may be significant, especially in light of their desire to have complete independence from their former spouse.

Yet as more parents recognize that bird nesting is clearly the best arrangement for their children, the number of bird nesters is steadily rising.

As with all co-parenting arrangements, it is vital that social institutions such as the courts and legal system, school systems, and social welfare institutions actively support co-parents in bird nesting arrangements. This is of paramount importance if parents are going to achieve success to the benefit of their children.

What Makes for Successful Co-Parenting after Divorce?

Whenever parents seek advice about helping their children adjust to the fallout of divorce, they are, more often than not, instructed with useful ideas about how to behave in a positive manner to the benefit of their children.

They are typically told: “Don’t put your children in the middle of conflict between you and your ex”; about what not to do rather than provide, “Don’t badmouth the other parent.” Although such advice has its place, it nevertheless assumes a deficit perspective in relation to divorcing parents, and overlooks parents’ good faith efforts and capacity to do the best for their children, given a little support. Having bitterness toward your ex is hard on the children and may bring on hatred for doing so for putting down the other parent. Caution!

Many such prescriptions also fall short in regard to offering concrete, practical steps that parents can take to enable their children to not only cope with the divorce, but flourish in its aftermath.

The following principles are offered in the spirit that parents have the strengths, capacities and abilities to help children through the difficult transitions attendant to divorce, and will be able to do the best for their children with concrete, practical

support. It is the responsibility of service providers and support networks to support parents in their quest to address their children needs during and after divorce.

What we expect of others, they endeavor to provide: if we expect divorcing parents to be responsible and act in their children best interests, and provide the supports to enable them to do so, they will act accordingly; if we expect them to fail, they will fail.

Although there is no “typical divorce” and no “magic formula” for ensuring positive child and family outcomes, and every child and family are unique, there are some general principles for successful co-parenting that apply to most, if not all, divorcing families:

- Be there for your children, both physically and emotionally. Quantity of time matters; quality relationships are not possible without sufficient routine time to develop and sustain those relationships. But although quantity of parental time is necessary for successful child outcomes, it is not sufficient: children also need their parents to be emotionally present, engaged and attuned, taking an interest in all aspects of their lives and actively involved in their day-to-day routines.
- Talk with your children about the divorce. Above all, children need to know that they will not be abandoned, physically or emotionally, by either of their parents. Reassure them by first of all creating a safe environment for the discussion, and a safe way to express their feelings of shock and confusion, self-blame, fear, grief and sadness, anger, or guilt. Recognize that divorce is a long-term process for children, not a one-time event, and be prepared to have

several such talks. If possible, talk with your children together as parents, reassuring them that you will cooperate in the future.

- Let children be children. Don't involve children in adult problems; rather, maintain continuity in their existing routines and relationships, and shelter them from the struggles that are properly the responsibility of their parents.
- Support the other parent's role and relationship with your children. The idea is to maximize and optimize the time that your children can spend with each of their parents. It is extremely difficult for parents to be at their best when having to parent under duress, and when having to deal with a co-parent who is less than supportive of their role and relationship with their children. You can support each other as parents by keeping to the co-parenting schedule, remaining flexible in accommodating each other wherever possible and moving from a place of conflict and antagonism toward that of cooperation as parents. A big part of this is to separate your previous hostilities as a couple from your ongoing co-parenting responsibilities.
- Speak about and act in a respectful manner toward the other parent, especially in front of your children. Conveying an attitude of respect toward your co-parent is vital to children well being, and shielding children from conflict is essential. There are few things more damaging to a child than witnessing conflict between parents, and ongoing conflict cuts to the heart of a child's well-being, as a children see themselves as essentially half their mother and half their father. Keep this at the forefront of all interactions between you and the other parent in front of the child.
- Wherever possible, maintain open communication channels with the other parent. Open and regular communication is the key to cooperative parenting.

If this is not possible, then phone calls, emails, or stockpiling concerns to be discussed at periodic “co-parenting meetings,” with or without a third party present, are good alternatives. If you are unable to communicate without resorting to conflict and recriminations, a parallel parenting plan in which co-parenting arrangements are spelled out in a detailed agreed-upon schedule, is another effective option.

- Maintain your child’s community of support. Essential to children is the security of maintaining existing relationships and routines with extended family members, friends, school and other activities. This adds to children sense of stability, continuity, and predictability in their lives.
- Educate yourself about children needs, co-parenting options, and community resources. Shared parenting offers parents an almost infinite variety of co-parenting scheduling possibilities commensurate with children ages and stages of development, and can be tailor-made to children and families’ unique circumstances.
- Seek out formal and informal sources of co-parenting support. Family members, friends and informal support networks are vital in helping parents work through difficult feelings, including anger management, and the multiple challenges and transitions attendant to divorce. More formal sources of support also span a wide array: therapeutic family mediation focused on the development and implementation of co-parenting plans, divorce coaching and parenting coordination in high conflict situations.
- Maintain your own health and well being as a priority. Taking care of yourself is essential not only for your own but your children well being. Your children depend on you, and you owe it to them to prioritize your own physical,

emotional and mental health. For parents struggling in the face of systemic barriers to co-parenting: never, never give up.

Above all, it is critical to keep in mind that the two most important factors in children successful adjustment to the consequences of divorce are the maintenance of a meaningful routine relationship with each of their parents, and to be shielded from ongoing parental conflict.

The challenge for parents is to develop and maintain a co-parenting relationship that ensures that both of these essential needs are met. The challenge for both professional service providers and informal support networks is to support and not undermine parents in the fulfillment of their responsibilities in regard to these needs of children in particular.

Such arrangements call for a high degree of specificity in the initial parenting plan, per-empting the need for parents to communicate directly with each other once the plan is in place. The higher the conflict level, the greater the structure and specificity that is required in a parallel parenting plan.

- Although parallel parenting is essentially disengaged parenting, some degree of communication between parents in regard to the health and welfare of their children will be necessary. In these cases, parallel parenting will likely involve non-direct communication methods such as email.
- A useful tool is a “parent communication notebook,” in which each parent writes a summary of the child’s emotions and behaviors during the time their child is with them, and the notebook routinely passes between the parents. Included in this notebook is information about children health, feeding and sleeping patterns, school-related issues, the children moods, what soothes

children, what upsets them, the daily routine, and other information about children needs.

- This is done in a respectful tone, with no criticisms or instructions about how the other is to parent the children. Yet another option is a “parenting meeting” with a neutral third party present, during which parents’ stockpiled concerns are discussed in more detail. The latter may also be used in regard to negotiating important issues such as choosing a school, religious upbringing, and medical care.
- ❖ Cautions. Many more high conflict families would benefit from parallel parenting than is commonly assumed. At the same time, it is clearly not for everyone. There are varying levels of parental conflict, and couples exhibiting family violence are not good candidates for such an arrangement, especially when child and parental safety is at issue.

With clear safety plans in place, parallel parenting may emerge as a consideration, but only with careful external monitoring after initial judicial determination of parenting arrangements.

But even in some family violence situations, parents may eventually disengage from their conflict for the benefit of their children; thus parents in extreme high conflict and some manifesting family violence (in which the abuse has stopped and an iron-clad safety plan is in place) should not be ruled out as candidates for parallel parenting.

However, a rebuttal presumption against co-parenting, including parallel parenting, in situations of interpersonal violence, is a prudent guideline for family court judges to follow in deciding parenting after divorce arrangements. A similar

presumption would apply in cases where a child is found to be in need of protection from a parent.

The future of parallel parenting. As more research studies identify the importance of both parents actively parenting and containing their conflict as essential elements in children adjustment to divorce, it is likely that parallel parenting will increasingly become the option of choice both for parents negotiating post-divorce parenting arrangements, and a preferred outcome in the arena of judicial determination of parenting arrangements.

In parental conflict situations, in the majority of cases judges simply have no basis for deciding which parent should have primary custody of children; parallel parenting provides them with a viable co-parenting alternative.

There is thus no reason that even in extreme cases of intractable conflict, parents cannot establish a co-parenting arrangement, particularly in light of recent evidence that shared parenting shield children from the destructive effects of high conflict. Parallel parenting honors both parents as equal contributors to children growth and development, even in the presence of high conflict and different parenting philosophies, rules and routines, and lifestyles.

In considering the feasibility of co-parenting, parents should not be held to an unrealistic level of mutual cooperation, as conflict is inevitable in divorce. As mentioned, in most cases parallel co-parenting in high conflict cases will lessen the anger between parents, with the passage of time, as neither parent is threatened by the loss of his or relationship with the children, and the ongoing hostility that prevails in the context of the “winner-take-all” regime of sole custody is avoided. In effect, parallel co-parenting in high conflict divorces begins the healing process between parents, to the ultimate benefit of their children.

Above everything else that the parents have to put aside whatever differences they have between themselves and start to communicate on what's the child needs and put the child first. The child is caught in the middle and doesn't know where to turn since they love both parents equally.

The child needs to know that each parent is there and deserve his or her attention. Spending time one on one with the child is more worth than all the gold in the world. The child needs to understand even though that the mother and father aren't living together anymore that the child know that Mama and Daddy love them very much and it's not in anyway their fault that they are not a whole family anymore. But that they will always be there for them.

The Do's and Don't s

Living with a chronic condition, like depression, requires you to focus on creating balance and well being on a daily basis. For those who are separated, divorced or sharing custody of a child, the struggles of co-parenting can produce enormous stressors.

Co-parenting sometimes called joint parenting or shared parenting, is the experience of raising children as a single parent when separation or divorce occurs. Often a difficult process, co-parenting is greatly influenced by the reciprocal interactions of each parent. So, if you're parenting in a healthy way but your Ex isn't, your children will be at risk for developmental problems.

It goes if you're being too permissive and your Ex is too stern. Co-parenting requires empathy, patience and open communication for success. Not an easy thing to achieve for couples who've encountered marital issues. However, placing the sole focus on your children can be a great way of helping to make co-parenting a positive experience. Here are some tips:

Two Ways of Problem Solving:

When co-parenting, there are two problem-solving techniques to keep in mind: Strategic problem-solving and Social-psychological problem solving.

Strategic problem-solving model looks just at the issues at hand. The behavioral aspects of your child's problem are highlighted as is the co-parenting trouble spots. Do not address the emotional reasons why problems are happening.

As co-parents you will identify the problem and negotiate choices and solutions as objectively as possible. Strategic problem solving directs each parent to resolve conflict through a careful approach of **(1)** exchanging information about needs and priorities, **(2)** building upon shared concerns, **(3)** and searching for solutions. This is done without getting into yours or your Ex's emotional needs, wants and desires.

Social-psychological problem solving is a more emotional way of resolving issues. The focus here looks at your attitudes and the emotional reasons for co-parenting blind spots. While the social-psychological model, like the strategic model, assumes that parenting conflicts are bound to arise, it differs from the strategic model by focusing on the psychological factors that drive conflict and negotiation impasses. Talking with your Ex using this model can be tough, and it's okay if you never reach this way of problem solving. But if you do, remember not to be accusatory or critical. Invite your Ex to see your side with empathy, compassion and authentic concern for the children.

Do's:

- **Commit to open dialogue with your Ex.**

Arrange to do this through email, texting, voice mail, letters or face to face conversation. Share information and communicate so you and your Ex don't have to directly touch base.

- **Rules should be consistent and agreed upon at both households.**

As much as they fight it, children need routine and structure. Issues like mealtime, bedtime, and completing chores need to be consistent. The same goes for schoolwork and projects. Running a tight ship creates a sense of security and predictability for children. So no matter where your child is, he or she knows that certain rules will be enforced.

"You know the deal, before we can go to the movies, you got get that bed made."

- **Commit to positive talk around the house.**

Make it a rule to frown upon your children talking disrespectfully about your Ex even though it may be music to your ears.

- **Agree on boundaries and behavioral guidelines**

For raising your children so that there's consistency in their lives, regardless of which parent they're with at any given time. Research shows that children in homes with a unified parenting approach have greater well being.

- **Create an Extended Family Plan.**

Negotiate and agree on the role extended family members will play and the access they'll be granted while your child is in each other's charge.

- **Recognize that co-parenting will challenge you**

- The reason for making accommodations in your parenting style is NOT BECAUSE YOUR EX WANTS THIS OR THAT, but for the needs of your children.

- **Be Aware of Slippery Slopes.**

Be aware that children will frequently test boundaries and rules, especially if there's a chance to get something they may not ordinarily be able to obtain. This is why a united front in co-parenting is recommended.

- **Be boring.**

Research shows that children need time to do ordinary things with their less-seen parent, not just fun things.

- **Update often.**

Although it may be emotionally painful, make sure that you and your Ex keep each other informed about all changes in your life, or circumstances that are challenging or difficult. It is important that your child is never, ever, and ever the primary source of information.

- **Go for the high notes.**

Each of you has valuable strengths as a parent. Remember to recognize the different traits you and your Ex have - and reinforce this awareness with your children. Speaking positively about your Ex teaches children that despite your differences, you can still appreciate positive things about your Ex. "Mommy's really good at making you feel better when you're sick. I know, I'm not as good as she is." It also directs children to see the positive qualities in his or her parent too. "Daddy's much better at organizing things than I am."

- Have clear, consistent schedules and rules.
- Keep each other abreast of any parenting-related developments or important issues.
- Schedule appointments to speak with your ex about any problems, then be polite but firm while trying to solve them.

- Develop a trust level between each other – this means being 100% trustworthy yourself.
- Be civil and reasonable at all times.

Don't s:

- **Don't burden your child.**

Emotionally charged issues about your Ex should never be part of your parenting. Never sabotage your child's relationship with your Ex by trash talking. Never use your child to gain information about things going on or to sway your Ex about an issue. The main thing here is this: Don't expose children to conflict. Research shows that putting children in the middle of your adult issues promotes feelings of helplessness and insecurity, causing children to question their own strengths and abilities.

- **Don't jump to conclusions or condemn your Ex.**

When you hear things from your children that make you bristle, take a breath and remain quiet. Remember that any negative comments your children make are often best taken with a grain of salt. It's always good to remain neutral when things like this happen. Research shows that your child can learn to resent and distrust you if you cheer them on.

- **Don't be an unbalanced parent.**

Resist being the fun guy or the cool mom when your children are with you. Doing so backfires once they return to your Ex - and sets into motion a cycle of resentment, hostility and a reluctance to follow rules for all involved. Remember that children develop best with a united front. Co-parenting with a healthy dose of fun, structure and predictability is a win-win for everyone.

- **Don't give into guilt.**

Divorce is a painful experience, and one that conjures up many emotions. Not being in your child's life on a full time basis can cause you to convert your guilt into overindulgence. Understand the psychology of parental guilt - and how to recognize that granting wishes without limits is never good. Research shows that children can become self-centered, lack empathy and believe in the need to get unrealistic entitlement from others. Confusion understanding the dynamics of need versus want, as well as taming impulsively becomes troublesome for children to negotiate too.

- **Don't punish your Ex by allowing your child to wiggle out of responsibility.**

Loosening the reigns because you just want to be a thorn in your Ex's side is a big no-no. "I know Mommy likes you to get your homework done first, but you can do that later." "Don't tell Daddy I gave you the extra money to buy the video game you've been working towards." If you need to get your negative emotions out, find another outlet. Voodoo dolls, skeet shooting and kick boxing can yield the same results, but with less of a parenting mess. Remember, work before play is a golden rule - and one that will help your child throughout their lifetime. Making sure to be consistent helps your child transition back and forth from your Ex - and back and forth to you too.

- **Don't accuse. Discuss.**

Never remain quiet if something about your Ex's co-parenting is troubling you. If you don't have a good personal relationship with your Ex, create a working business arrangement. Communication about co-parenting is extremely vital for your child's healthy development. No finger pointing or you-keep-doing-this kind of talk. The best approach when communicating is to make your child the focal point: "I see the kids doing this-and-that after they return home from their visit.

Any ideas of what we can do?" Notice there's not one "you" word in there. No accusatory tone or finger-pointing either.

Effective parenting after divorce requires effective communication – both between the co-parents and between the parents and children. Even if they don't



like each other, or disagree on many issues, divorced parents still have to work together as a team as far as their children are concerned. In addition, the lines should always be open for the children to express their thoughts and feelings and to be aware of the new rules and boundaries. Everybody should know what's going on. With stronger co-parenting communication, there will be less chance of misunderstandings and conflicts between the ex-spouses – and a better chance of a healthy upbringing for the children.

Communicating with Your Ex During and After Divorce:

It's not hard to see that the adjustment from an intact family to two separate co-parenting homes will be extremely awkward at best. So it's essential to make the transition as smooth as possible for the children. A frequent barrier to successful post-divorce parenting is when parents give in to the conflict that split them up in the first place. "To achieve a collaborative status between co-parents, you need to learn to devise strategies for conflict management, "Otherwise, the child gets caught in the middle. Conflict is often the culprit: children are exposed to the conflict, and it creates long-term psychological-adjustment problems."

Continued open fighting or resentment between co-parents creates a negative, uncomfortable environment for your child and undermines any attempt to forge a stable routine in custody and visitation. It also makes you and your ex poor role models for your child's social and communication skills. Hostility makes co-parents work against, rather than with, each other: sometimes, they use the kids as

messengers, or they withhold support or visitation in order to punish the other parent. Never ever argue or fight in front of the children, it will leave them in a bad way.

Rather than being a focused parent who acts for the kids' sake, it's really a way of excusing yourself from your co-parenting responsibilities.

"One of the biggest mistakes is that people end up, under the condition of fear, focusing on things in life they can't control, and that paralyzes their power as parents," Every moment a parent spends trying to get the ex to change or act differently is a moment lost with the children.

So put aside your differences and get together on what the new rules, boundaries, and methods are going to be. "You should work hard at sticking to a schedule," Keep it consistent, so that the kids know there's a routine, as opposed to surprise visits or changes. And keep in touch to make sure everybody knows what's going on with the routine. "Make sure there's a freedom to phone each other; don't overdo it, but do it for checks and verification. Schedule times; ask each other about activities you should be aware of."

"The challenge is to find a way to communicate with one another in the context of a business relationship," This helps people to rise above their more primitive emotions, with a compassionate focus on what the child needs. It helps parents rediscover their power. The fastest way to peace is to focus away from getting your ex to be different and on a way to be better to the children.

Sometimes it may be tempting to blame your co-parent right away when something goes wrong. This may be a result of any ongoing tension you may still have with him or her, as well as your protective instincts for your children. But resist the impulse to overreact and jump to conclusions. Examine the situation first from all sides: maybe it's not as urgent or important as you think.

You have to have faith in the other parent, You may not have done well as a couple, but as parents, you have to have faith. The ex is not going to be in the house any longer, so develop a trust level. They could be making the right decisions, for all you know. Both parents should be on the same page.

If you strongly suspect that there's a problem with your ex-spouse's parenting, or if you disapprove of certain actions, don't broach the subject in a hostile way. "Express your complaint not as a character slam but as a worry about the kids," That way, you're less likely to get the other person's back up. Be specific about the worries you have and what your ex should do differently. Don't slam the other person's character or refer to past problems. Focus on the present and emphasize the things that worry you about the children.

So accept that you and your ex will continue working together – and do what you can to keep your post-divorce relationship civil and open. "Sometimes the co-parenting relationship will be happy, sometimes not well, and you have to expect that," Accept that there will be highs and lows. It's so important to put the child's priorities first.

Communicating with Your Kids During and After Divorce:

Both co-parents and the children must be equally clear about the rules and schedules. Their reactions to the new rules will vary according to their age and temperament: older children may be averse to sudden changes to a family situation they've been accustomed to as long as they remember, while others are too young to understand what's going on and become used to the separate-parents environment as they age.

On the other hand, because divorce is more commonplace today than ever before, the kids may be more hip to the situation than you think. Hopefully, you know

your children well enough to anticipate their reactions and have a plan for dealing with them.

Be aware that the transition from one to two homes can be confusing and frightening from a child's point of view. "One common issue in the early months following separation is that the child's reluctant to go to the other parent's home, when that parent has moved to an apartment or someplace else," It's a comfort for the kids to be in the original home, and they may to not want to leave it. Kids should know when they will be with each parent, although both parents should also be available for emergencies.

Having a calendar in both homes with the days a child will spend with each parent clearly marked can help the child feel more secure. For younger children, use different colors for days spent with Mom and days with Dad, and make sure they're aware of when a transition is going to occur.

The children best interests should be the first priority so be sure you and your ex know what they are. I would always encourage a parent to sit down and listen to a child.

Pay attention to what your kids tell you – both in their words and actions. You'll find out what it is they really want and need from you and your co-parent – and if there are any problems with the current system.

If your child is acting differently, as if something is bothering him or her, ask your child what's wrong – but in a gentle way that shows you're not going to make any judgments. "Parents sometimes forget the power of sitting down with a child and asking, Where did we go wrong? And talking about it," Always be empathetic with your child, as well as with your co-parent: try to see the situation from the other person's point of view before making any decisions or judgments.

Children should be encouraged to have strong relationships with both parents. But sometimes, it may appear that your child may be favoring the other parent over you. You may think that the other parent is spoiling the child and forcing you into the role of "Bad Cop." Again, don't jump to conclusions. "Remember that children go through different stages and may get along better with one parent at different ages and stages,"

The other parent may be more tolerant of certain actions, and some kids will play on that: 'Mom said I could do this.' Once they're told 'no' by both parents, they'll stop it. In these cases, it's not so much a matter of one child getting along better with the other parent.

"It's very common that one parent gets along better with a child than the other does."

But if the child knows that the parents are working together, they'll have an equal relationship.

"You're a parent first and a divorced parent second, so don't let the divorce play a significant role in your decision-making," Make decisions as a mom or dad, not as a divorced mom or dad. No matter how angry or upset you may still be about the divorce, be careful what you say when small ears may be listening. You don't want to give your children the mistaken impression that they were to blame for the breakup ("If only I had cleaned up my room/gotten better grades/didn't get sick on vacation, Mom and Dad would have stayed together"). It is never the children fault of the breakup.

Your ex is a parent to your child as much as you are – no matter how much you disagree with him or her. When there's tension between you and your ex, you may want your child to take your side – which will put an extreme strain on his/her loyalty.

It's also dangerous to speak derogatorily about your ex when your kids can hear (even if what you say is true) because that will put your children in a loyalty bind and could make them feel bad about themselves.

If you tell them their father's a "no-good bum," your children may end up thinking that they're no-good bums, too: after all, they have to have inherited something from both parents.

"Kids generally love both parents and want to be around them," Talking negatively about the other compounds the problem – in the long term for the child and in the short term for the targeted parent. Some adults whose parents divorced still resent it when one parent talks negatively about the other.

"One critical problem is that parents get so immersed in their own feelings of hurt and rage that the child gets forgotten," When the parents live in different houses, everybody experiences anxiety. It's tragic that people are so hurt that they lose the ability to honor the other parent's role in the child's life. They're so immersed in it that the other person is viewed as an enemy or substantially flawed human being, and that puts the child in a bind. The child goes to the home of somebody who may have been defined as flawed.

Your ex may no longer be your spouse, but he or she is your child's parent for life, so don't sabotage that relationship.

Remember that children read verbal messages and body language differently than adults do – usually with more naivete and literal interpretation – so make sure you think before you speak, and that your body language doesn't contradict what you're saying.

Common-sense Co-Parenting after Divorce:

"Parents sometimes lose sight of the fact that they're divorced as a marriage but not as a family," They'll be co-parenting for life through events such as birthdays, weddings, and graduations. When they know they're in this for the long run, they're much more motivated to have good communication.

Good communication among everybody involved – the parents and the children – involves both passing on information and paying attention. Always consider the consequences of the messages you get across, intentionally or not, and make sure you're always attuned to everybody else wants and needs.

One way to make sure you don't sabotage your co-parenting relationship is to ask yourself, "What result do I want from this communication?" before opening your mouth. Unless your answer is "To totally burn all my bridges and make sure my ex will never cooperate with me again," you will refrain from being rude, sarcastic, or accusatory when communicating with him/her.

Above all, remember that your children welfare must always be your first priority. Think about the long-term effects on your children of everything you and your ex say and do, and you can create the best possible co-parenting situation.

Rules for Co-parenting:

1. At all times, the decisions made by the parents will be for your child's psychological, spiritual, and physical well being and safety.
2. Do make and confirm parenting-time arrangements beforehand between the parents without involving your child.
3. Do notify each other in a timely manner of any need to deviate from the schedule between homes, including canceling time with your child, rescheduling, and punctuality.

4. Do communicate with your co-parent and make similar rules in reference to discipline, routines, sleeping arrangements, and schedules between homes. Appropriate discipline should be exercised by mutually agreed upon adults.
5. Do keep your co-parent informed of any scholastic, medical, psychiatric, or extracurricular activities or appointments of your child.
6. Do keep your co-parent informed at all times of your address and telephone number. If you are out of town with your child, do provide your co-parent the basic travel itinerary and a phone number so that you and your child may be reached in case of an emergency.
7. Do refer to your co-parent as your child's "mother" or "father" in conversation, rather than using "my ex."
8. Do not talk negatively, or allow others to talk negatively, about the other parent, their family and friends, or their home within hearing range of your child. This includes belittling remarks, ridicule, or bringing up allegations, whether valid or invalid, about issues involving the adults in the co-parenting relationship.
9. Do not question your child about your co-parent, the activities of your co-parent, or regarding your co-parent's personal life. In other words, do not use your child to spy on the other parent.
10. Do not argue or have heated conversations when your child is present.
11. Do not make promises to your child to try to "win your child over" at the expense of your child's other parent.
12. Do not schedule extracurricular activities for your child during the other parent's time without your co-parent's consent. However, do work together to allow your child to be involved in such activities.

13. Do not involve your child in adult issues and conversations about custody, the court, or the other parent.

14. Do not ask your child where he or she wants to live.

15. Do not attempt to alienate your co-parent from your child's life.

16. Do not allow stepparents or others to negatively alter or modify your relationship with your co-parent.

17. Do not use phrases that draw your child into your issues or make your child feel guilty about the time spent with the other parent. Do not say "I miss you!" Do say, "I love you "

Your co-parent seems unconcerned and isn't engaged in parenting:

Don't spend all your energy trying to change your co-parent. If they are not engaged in helping to make parenting decisions or taking their parenting responsibilities seriously, it isn't worth wasting your time shaming them. At the end of the day, we can only change our own ways and our own selves. Stay positive in your parenting and move forward.

Your co-parent is not interested in communicating with you, period:

Communication and trust between parents may breakdown almost altogether, and parents constantly find themselves in "he said – she said" situations. Verbal communication is out of the question and text messaging just isn't working, employing a communication tool specifically geared towards co-parenting may be the best route to take.

Your child complains about having to stay at their other parent's house:

Parenting from two homes isn't easy, especially if your child starts expressing to you how they don't like the rules they must follow when at their other parent's

house. You may notice this more from teenage children. While you may want to, take a step back and don't get involved with your co-parent about this.

Be attentive to your child's concerns and help them to practice healthy communication skills.

This way, they can better articulate their feelings and gain value in effectively stating their opinions on an issue they greatly care about. This also keeps you out of a potential conflict with your co-parent.

At the end of the day, you can only truly control your own actions. If your ex-spouse is simply not showing interest in co-parenting in a productive, healthy manner, you will have to stop hoping that things will change – because it's likely they won't.

Your child is used as a messenger by your co-parent:

Your child is not a pawn or card to play in your co-parenting conflicts. They do not deserve to feel that pressure and confusion that comes up when they are, often times, unknowingly being used by one parent to hurt the other. Your child deserves the opportunity to build a positive relationship with both of their parents.

Keep co-parenting issues out of your child's earshot, and respect your child's relationship with your ex. If you find your co-parent overstepping their boundaries and probing your child for information, remind your child that they don't have to answer those questions and can simply tell your co-parent that they don't want to talk about it. Let your child know that you respect their relationship with their other parent.

Do not make your children pushed to hating the other parent and saying things against that is not true "Bad mouthing them, putting down" it could back fire and the children could start to hate you in the end.

As parents you once started out loving each other and in making a child, no matter why the two parents of the child broke up the bond is no concern. The main point is the child's well being and in raising with support and that the child knows that they still have loving parents.

Parents need to remember that buying things for the child isn't showing love, they are just things. A child wants to know that they can count on the parents. Hugs and kissing a boobo and saying I love you mean more to a child than all the money you spend.

Like the old song: "You can't buy me Love" comes to mind on this.

Psychological Child adolescent Problems:

Parenting conflicts are bound to arise focusing on the psychological factors of a child whom starts to show signs of depression, anger out burst and suicide because stressed out because of the parents can't seem to agree on things. Never have an argument in front of your child, yelling at each other will not solve anything and scaring the child whom just wants to see love in the home and not hatred of the parents, With this more problems will arise. And possibility the child will go into a shut down mode.

Child psychological problems will start to show from the time parents separate.

A child might start to show being depressed and being with drawn, anger by stopping, throwing things, breaking things and even talking back and being disrespectful.

Yelling back at a parent and saying "Mommy or Daddy doesn't love me any more and that's why they left because of you!" The child anger starts to grow and get out of hand.

When parents fight in front of their children it leaves problem for the children, they will show disrespect and rejection toward either parent or even both parents.

Children can and will attempt or even commit final suicide, you have to look for the signs. A child's feeling run very deep since they love both parents and feels they're caught in the middle of the separation and don't want to take sides. A child might call out for help if not listening when they try to talk to you by self-cutting their arms, banging their heads.

Parents don't realize that the child's problems caused by the separation and fighting by them can be detrimental to health of the child of both mental and physical being.

Children adolescent is a learning process in growing up and guidance is hard enough.

Children and teens can develop the same mental health disorders and conditions as adults, but their symptoms may be different or hard to identify.

Your child or teen might need help if he or she:

- Often feels very angry or very worried
- Can't sleep or eat
- Is unable to enjoy pleasurable activities any more
 - Isolates her/himself and avoids social interactions
 - Feels grief for a long time after a loss or death
 - Uses alcohol or drugs
 - Exercises, diets and/or binge-eats obsessively
 - Hurts other people or destroys property
- Has low or no energy
- Smokes, drinks, or use drugs
- Feels like he or she can't control own emotions
- Has thoughts of suicide
- Harms her/himself, such as cutting or burning her/his skin



- Thinks his or her mind is controlled or out of control
- Hears voices

Parents need to listen to their children and don't be criticizing, listen to what they have to say and have an open mind. Let your child know they don't have to be afraid to talk and open up about what their feeling. Let them know that you won't be upset with them, that whatever is said they will understand even if it has to do with either parent.

Finding what the root of the problem is and what causes it, is the first step in helping the child cope through their adolescent period to young adulthood.

TIPS FOR PARENTING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS:

- It is important to note that children learn how to act by watching their parents.
- Consistency in following through with consequences is key.
- It is important to remain calm and be in control of your emotions when dealing with your child's negative behavior.
- Recognize your child's good behavior and abilities.
- Children respond well to structure and routine in their daily life.
- Bedtime routines help a child to relax in preparation for sleep.
- It is important for parents to take care of themselves so they have adequate energy to care for their children. This means adequate sleep, exercise and nutrition, which helps, keep the stress level manageable and emotions in check.
- Set aside time each day to talk with or engage in an activity with your child. It may only be 10-15 minutes but the child will feel that they are important in your life and it will build their self-esteem.
- Offer your child choices rather than ultimatums.

- When talking to your child about issues or behaviors keep the focus on the behavior.
- When dealing with negative behaviors, pick your battles.
- Time outs need to be a learning process not a punishment and therefore the behavior and the consequences for that behavior need to be clearly stated.
- Be consistent in using time outs and be certain the behavior has ended before the time out begins.
- If your child has tantrums and you have tried all the suggestions listed above, it may be time to sit down with others and in order to problem solve and assist the child in gaining control of their emotions and behaviors.

TIPS FOR PARENTING ADOLESCENTS:

- If you encounter a power struggle with your teen: Be firm when setting limits, but be flexible and negotiate within the limits you have chosen to set. Provide logical consequences and maintain a positive relationship with your child.
- Effective parenting includes the following: Including your teen in the problem solving process and treating your teenager with respect. Allow them freedom within limits and use logical consequences for their behaviors instead of responding with anger or punishment.
- Build an effective relationship with your teenager by spending time together each week as a family in an identified activity. Find activities that everyone will enjoy and ask your teen for some suggestions. Keep it fun and remember that this is not a time for problem solving.
- The mistake many parents make is trying to control their children's behavior. The best we can do as a parent is to influence their choices. This includes setting appropriate expectations and limits for their behavior.
- A sense of self-esteem is one of the most important gifts a parent can give a child. Accept your child as they are and encourage them even when they are less than perfect.

- Look upon problems and conflicts between you and your teen as opportunities for growth and for teaching cooperation, responsibility, and courage.
- The first step in getting a teen to change their behavior is to ask in a polite way. An example of talking to them would be, “When you leave your clothes thrown around I feel sad because it doesn’t seem as though you recognize how hard I had to work to get them for you. I would like you to pick them up. It would help me out and it would be good practice for when you have your own home.”
- When an “I” message, as listed above, is not strong enough to motivate your teen to change their behavior, then use logical consequences. Give the teen an Either/Or Choice or a When/Then choice. Ask the teen to help and give choices you can live with.
- An approachable parent is a parent that a teen will come to for support when there is a problem. To ensure you are an approachable parent, make sure you are someone the teen can trust. Accept the teen as they are and be non-judgmental. Be willing to listen and help when there is a problem.
- Children ages 8 to 15 had at least one behavioral health issues, a rate that is comparable to diabetes, asthma, and other diseases of childhood. Yet, mental disorders often go undiagnosed and untreated for years.

How do children grow and develop between ages 11 and 14?

The ages 11 through 14 years are often referred to as early adolescence. These years are an exciting time of many varied and rapid changes. Your child grows taller and stronger and also starts to feel and think in more mature ways. You may feel amazed as you watch your child begin to turn into an adult. But this can be a confusing time for both kids and parents. Both must get used to the new person the child is becoming.

From ages 11 through 14, a child develops in four main areas:

- Physical development. Adolescence is a time of change throughout the body. A growth spurt usually occurs near the time of puberty. Girls begin to develop breasts and start their periods. Boys grow facial hair. Both boys and girls grow pubic hair. Boys may lag behind girls in height during these years, but they usually end up taller.
- Cognitive development. This is how the brain develops the abilities to think, learn, reason, and remember. Kids this age typically focus on the present, but they are starting to understand that what they do now can have long-term effects. They are also beginning to see that issues are not just clear-cut and that information can be interpreted in different ways.
- Emotional and social development. As they start to move from childhood into adulthood, adolescents feel the urge to be more independent from their families.
- Often, friends replace parents as a source of advice. When at home, adolescents may prefer spending time alone to being part of the family. Still, family support is important to help them build a strong sense of self.
- Sensory and motor development. Kids this age may be a little awkward or clumsy. Their brains need time to adjust to longer limbs and bigger bodies. Getting regular moderate exercise can improve coordination and help your child build healthy habits.

How can you help your child during these years?

Being the parent of an adolescent can be challenging. Even if your child pushes you away at times, you still play a very big role in your child's life. Try to stay positive and keep the lines of communication open. While it is good to let your child make decisions, realize that adolescents need and want limits that are fair and firm.

To promote healthy development:

- Help your child build healthy eating habits and a healthy body image. Serve balanced meals, and keep lots of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods in the house. Be a model of good eating and exercise habits for your child.
- Urge your child to get some exercise every day.
- Help your adolescent get enough rest. Set limits on phone, computer, and TV use after a set evening hour.
- Encourage mature thinking. Involve your child in setting house rules. Talk about current issues together. Brainstorm different ways to solve problems, and discuss their possible outcomes.
- Talk about sex and other adult issues in an open and natural way. Make this an ongoing conversation. It is best to begin this discussion before puberty so the child knows what to expect. If you don't feel able to do this, ask for help from your doctor, a trusted friend or family member, or a counselor. Don't let your child rely on information from TV or other kids.
- Throughout these years, it is important to let adolescents know they are loved and accepted, no matter what happens, even if at times you don't agree with what they do or how they act.

One on One with Child:

When parent are separated or divorced it hard all the way round and no body win and can hurt the main one that both parents love and that's the child.

A child will soon neglect either or both parents because of them arguing they do in front of the child and shows the child that either parent doesn't have any respect and the parents sometime throw items around and worse yet being abusive to the other parent.

The child may shut down mode and with draw and go into depression.

Watch for Behavioral changes in behavior, such as:

- Tiredness and loss of energy
- Insomnia or sleeping too much



- Changes in appetite — decreased appetite and weight loss, or increased cravings for food and weight gain
- Use of alcohol or drugs
- Agitation or restlessness — for example, pacing, hand-wringing or an inability to sit still
- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- Frequent complaints of unexplained body aches and headaches, which may include frequent visits to the school nurse
- Social isolation
- Poor school performance or frequent absences from school
- Neglected appearance
- Angry outbursts, disruptive or risky behavior, or other acting-out behaviors
- Self-harm — for example, cutting, burning, or excessive piercing or tattooing
- Making a suicide plan or a suicide attempt
- What's normal and what's not

It can be difficult to tell the difference between ups and downs that are just part of being a teenager and teen depression. Talk with your teen. Try to determine whether he or she seems capable of managing challenging feelings, or if life seems overwhelming.

When to see a doctor:

If depression symptoms continue or begin to interfere in your teen's life, talk to a doctor or a mental health professional trained to work with adolescents. Your teen's family doctor or pediatrician is a good place to start. Or your teen's school may recommend someone.

Depression symptoms likely won't get better on their own — and they may get worse or lead to other problems if untreated. Depressed teenagers may be at risk of suicide, even if signs and symptoms don't appear to be severe.

If you're a teen and you think you may be depressed — or you have a friend who may be depressed — don't wait to get help. Talk to a health care provider such as your doctor or school nurse. Share your concerns with a parent, a close friend, a spiritual leader, a teacher or someone else you trust.

Teen depression signs and symptoms include a change from the teenager's previous attitude and behavior that can cause significant distress and problems at school or home, in social activities or other areas of life.

Depression symptoms can vary in severity, but changes in your teen's emotions and behavior may include the examples below.

Be alert for emotional changes, such as:

- Feelings of sadness, which can include crying spells for no apparent reason
- Feeling hopeless or empty
- Irritable or annoyed mood
- Frustration or feelings of anger, even over small matters
- Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities
- Loss of interest in, or conflict with, family and friends
- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Fixation on past failures or exaggerated self-blame or self-criticism
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure, and the need for excessive reassurance
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
- Ongoing sense that life and the future are grim and bleak

- Frequent thoughts of death, dying or suicide

What's normal and what's not:

It can be difficult to tell the difference between ups and downs that are just part of being a teenager and teen depression. Talk with your teen. Try to determine whether he or she seems capable of managing challenging feelings, or if life seems overwhelming.

It is very important to take the time and sit down and talk to your child on what they are feeling and how to make things better for them. They have to know that things in the home will not be the same since the other parent isn't living in the household anymore.

They need to know that just because the other parent isn't living there that they are always loved and whatever reason why the parents are no longer together is never, ever the child's fault. But the parents will always be there for them.

The bible says:



Honor your Father and Mother and you try to teach your children that, but remember when a child sees their parents arguing, even physical or verbal abuse not respecting each other they won't respect either of the parents. Now with this the child will be disrespectful as well as acting up all the time and not

caring. They're hurting due to the problems that the parents act out in front of the child.

When you as a parent lose the respect of your child you can only blame yourself due to you own actions. As the saying goes: "Actions speak louder than words."

Here is a thought see in (1 Corinthians 13:11)

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Start acting like a caring, loving adult and teach your child in the way of the Lord.

Need to be in a calm and peaceful matter to each other for the child is part of both parents. Remember the child looks up to you for guidance in their young lives in their growth through their childhood. All family members need to continue with counseling, both parents together and separate counseling as well as counseling with the child. This is needed to get to the root of the problem to solve and make a better foundation.

Making Joint Custody Work after a Separation or Divorce

Co-parenting amicably with your ex can give your children stability and close relationships with both parents—but it's rarely easy. Putting aside relationship issues to co-parent agreeably can be fraught with stress. Despite the many challenges, though, it is possible to develop a cordial working relationship with your ex for the sake of your children. With these tips, you can remain calm, stay consistent, and avoid or resolve conflict with your ex and make joint custody work.

Joint custody arrangements, especially after an acrimonious split, can be exhausting and infuriating. It can be extremely difficult to get past the painful history you may have with your ex and overcome any built-up resentment.

Making shared decisions, interacting with each another at drop-offs, or just speaking to a person you'd rather forget all about can seem like impossible tasks. But while it's true that co-parenting isn't an easy solution, it is the best way to ensure your children's needs are met and they are able to retain close relationships with both parents.

Co-parenting is the best option for your children

Through your parenting partnership, your kids should recognize that they are more important than the conflict that ended the marriage—and understand that your love for them will prevail despite changing circumstances.

Kids whose divorced parents have a cooperative relationship:

Feel secure. When confident of the love of both parents, kids adjust more quickly and easily to divorce and have better self-esteem.

Benefit from consistency.

Co-parenting fosters similar rules, discipline, and rewards between households, so children know what to expect, and what's expected of them.

Better understand problem solving. Children who see their parents continuing to work together are more likely to learn how to effectively and peacefully solve problems themselves.

Have a healthy example to follow. By cooperating with the other parent, you are establishing a life pattern your children can carry into the future.

Setting hurt and anger aside:

The key to co-parenting is to focus on your children—and your children only. Yes, this can be very difficult. It means that your own emotions—any anger, resentment, or hurt—must take a back seat to the needs of your children. Admittedly, setting aside such strong feelings may be the hardest part of learning to work cooperatively with your ex, but it's also perhaps the most vital. Co-parenting is not about your feelings, or those of your ex-spouse, but rather about your child's happiness, stability, and future well being.

Separating feelings from behavior:

It's okay to be hurt and angry, but your feelings don't have to dictate your behavior. Instead, let what's best for your kids—you working cooperatively with the other parent—motivate your actions.

Get your feelings out somewhere else. Never vent to your child. Friends, therapists, or even a loving pet can all make good listeners when you need to get negative feelings off your chest. Exercise can also be a healthy outlet for letting off steam.

Stay kid-focused. If you feel angry or resentful, try to remember why you need to act with purpose and grace: your child's best interests are at stake. If your anger feels overwhelming, looking at a photograph of your child may help you calm down.

Use your body. Consciously putting your shoulders down, breathing evenly and deeply, and standing erect can keep you distracted from your anger, and can have a relaxing effect.

Children in the middle:

You may never completely lose all of your resentment or bitterness about your break up, but what you can do is compartmentalize those feelings and remind yourself that they are your issues, not your child's. Resolve to keep your issues with your ex away from your children.

Never use kids as messengers: When you have your child tell the other parent something for you, it puts him or her in the center of your conflict. The goal is to keep your child out of your relationship issues, so call or email your ex yourself.

Keep your issues to yourself: Never say negative things about your ex to your children, or make them feel like they have to choose. Your child has a right to a relationship with his or her other parent that is free of your influence.

Communicating with your ex:

Relieving stress in the moment—no matter who you're dealing with

It may seem impossible to stay calm when dealing with a difficult ex-spouse who's hurt you in the past or has a real knack for pushing your buttons. But by practicing quick stress relief techniques, you can learn to stay in control when the pressure builds. See: [Stress Relief in the Moment](#)

It may be helpful to start thinking of your relationship with your ex as a completely new one—one that is entirely about the well-being of your children, and not about either of you. Your marriage may be over, but your family is not; doing what is best for your kids is your most important priority. The first step to being a mature, responsible co-parent is to always put your children's needs ahead of your own.

Peaceful, consistent, and purposeful communication with your ex is essential to the success of co-parenting—even though it may seem absolutely impossible. It all begins with your mindset. Think about communication with your ex as having the highest purpose: your child's well-being. Before contact with your ex, ask yourself how your talk will affect your child, and resolve to conduct yourself with dignity. Make your child the focal point of every discussion you have with your ex-partner.

Communication with your ex is likely to be a tough task. Remember that it isn't always necessary to meet your ex in person—speaking over the phone or exchanging texts or emails is fine for the majority of conversations. The goal is to establish conflict-free communication, so see which type of contact works best for

you. Whether talking via email, phone, or in person, the following methods can help you initiate and maintain effective communication:

Set a business-like tone. Approach the relationship with your ex as a business partnership where your “business” is your child’s well being. Speak or write to your ex as you would a colleague—with cordiality, respect, and neutrality. Relax and talk slowly.

Make requests. Instead of making statements, which can be misinterpreted as demands, try framing as much as you can as requests. Requests can begin "Would you be willing to...?" or “Can we try...?”

Listen:

Communicating with maturity starts with listening. Even if you end up disagreeing with the other parent, you should at least be able to convey to your ex that you’ve understood his or her point of view. And listening does not signify approval, so you won’t lose anything by allowing your ex to voice his or her opinions.

Show restraint:

Keep in mind that communicating with one another is going to be necessary for the length of your children's entire childhood—if not longer. You can train yourself to not overreact to your ex, and over time you can become numb to the buttons he or she tries to push.

Commit to meeting/talking consistently:

Frequent communication with your ex will convey the message to your children that you and their other parent are a united front. This may be extremely difficult in the early stages of your divorce or separation.

Keep conversations kid-focused:

You can control the content of your communication. Never let a discussion with your ex-partner digress into a conversation about your needs or his/her needs; it should always be about your child's needs only.

Improving the relationship with your ex:

If you are truly ready to rebuild trust after a separation or divorce, be sincere about your efforts. Remember your children's best interests as you move forward to improve your relationship.

Ask his or her opinion:

This fairly simple technique can effectively jump-start positive communications between you and your ex. Take an issue that you don't feel strongly about, and ask for your ex's input, showing that you value his or her input.

Apologize:

When you're sorry about something, take the time to apologize sincerely—even if the incident happened a long time ago. Apologizing can be very powerful in moving your relationship away from being adversaries.

Chill out:

If a special outing with your ex is going to cut into your time with your child by an hour graciously let it be. Remember that it's all about what is best for your child; plus, when you show flexibility, your ex is more likely to be flexible with you.

Parenting as a team:

Parenting is full of decisions you'll have to make with your ex, whether you like each another or not. Cooperating and communicating without blow-ups or bickering makes decision-making far easier on everybody. If you shoot for

consistency, geniality, and teamwork with your ex, the details of child-rearing decisions tend to fall into place.

Aim for consistency:

It's healthy for children to be exposed to different perspectives and to learn to be flexible, but they also need to know they're living under the same basic set of expectations at each home. Aiming for consistency between your home and your ex's avoids confusion for your children.

Rules:

Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but if you and your ex-spouse establish generally consistent guidelines, your kids won't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments. Important lifestyle rules like homework issues, curfews, and off-limit activities should be followed in both households.

Discipline:

Try to follow similar systems of consequences for broken rules, even if the infraction didn't happen under your roof. So, if your kids have lost TV privileges while at your ex's house, follow through with the restriction. The same can be done for rewarding good behavior.

Schedule:

Where you can, aim for some consistency in your children's schedules. Making meals, homework, and bedtimes similar can go a long way toward your child's adjustment to having two homes.

Important issues:

Major decisions need to be made by both you and your ex. Being open, honest, and straightforward about important issues is crucial to both your relationships with your ex and your children's well-being.

Medical needs:

Effective co-parenting can help parents focus on the best medical care for the child, and can help reduce anxiety for everyone. Whether you decide to designate one parent to communicate primarily with health care professionals or attend medical appointments together, keep one another in the loop.

Education:

School plays a major role in maintaining a stable environment for your kids, so be sure to let them know about changes in your child's living situation. Speak with your ex ahead of time about class schedules, extra-curricular activities, and parent-teacher conferences, and be polite to him or her at school or sports events.

Financial issues:

The cost of maintaining two separate households can strain your attempts to be effective co-parents. Set a realistic budget and keep accurate records for shared expenses. Be gracious if your ex provides opportunities for your children that you cannot provide.

Disagreements:

As you co-parent, you and your ex are bound to disagree over certain issues. Keep the following in mind as you try to come to consensus with your ex.

Respect can go a long way.

Simple manners are often neglected between co-parents, even though they should be the foundation for co-parenting. Being considerate and respectful includes letting your ex know about school events, being flexible about your schedule when possible, and taking his or her opinion seriously.

Keep talking.

It might sound tedious, but if you disagree about something important, you will need to continue to communicate about the topic. Never discuss your differences of opinions with or in front of your child. If you still can't agree, you may need to talk to a third party, like a therapist or mediator.

Don't sweat the small stuff.

If you disagree about important issues like a medical surgery or choice of school for your child, by all means keep the discussion going. But if you want your child in bed by 7:30 and your ex says 8:00, try to let it go and save your energy for the bigger issues.

Compromise.

Yes, you will need to come around to your ex spouse's point of view as often as he or she comes around to yours. It may not always be your first choice, but compromise allows you both to "win" and makes both of you more likely to be flexible in the future.

Making transitions easier:

The actual move from one household to another, whether it happens every few days or just on weekends, can be a very hard time for children. Transitions represent a major change in your children's reality. Every reunion with one parent is also a separation with the other; each "hello" is also a "goodbye." In joint custody arrangements, transition time is inevitable, but there are many things you

can do to help make exchanges and transitions easier, both when your children leave and return.

When your child leaves

As kids prepare to leave your house for your ex's, try to stay positive and deliver them on time. You can use the following strategies to help make transitions easier.

Help children anticipate change. Remind kids they'll be leaving for the other parent's house a day or two before the visit.

Pack in advance.

Depending on their age, help children pack their bags well before they leave so that they don't forget anything they'll miss. Encourage packing familiar reminders like a special stuffed toy or photograph.

Always drop off—never pick up the child on "switch day." It's a good idea to avoid "taking" your child from the other parent so that you don't risk interrupting or curtailing a special moment. Drop off your child at the other parent's house instead.

When your child returns:

The beginning of your children's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. You can try the following to help your child adjust:

Keep things low-key:

When children first enter your home, try to have some down time together—read a book or do some other quiet activity.

Double up:

To make packing simpler and make kids feel more comfortable when they are at the other parent's house, have kids keep certain basics—toothbrush, hairbrush, and pajamas—at both houses.

Allow the child space:

Children often need a little time to adjust to the transition. If they seem to need some space, do something else nearby. In time, things will get back to normal.

Establish a special routine:

Play a game or serve the same special meal each time your child returns. Kids thrive on routine—if they know exactly what to expect when they return to you it can help the transition.

Dealing with visitation refusal:

Sometimes kids refuse to leave one parent to be with the other. Although this can be a difficult situation, it is also common for children in joint custody.

- Find the cause. The problem may be one that is easy to resolve, like paying more attention to your child, making a change in discipline style, or having more toys or other entertainment. Or it may be that an emotional reason is at hand, such as conflict or misunderstanding. Talk to your child about his or her refusal.
- Go with the flow. Whether you have detected the reason for the refusal or not, try to give your child the space and time that he or she obviously needs. It may have nothing to do with you at all. And take heart: most cases of visitation refusal are temporary.

- Talk to your ex. A heart-to-heart with your ex about the refusal may be challenging and emotional, but can help you figure out what the problem is. Try to be sensitive and understanding to your ex as you discuss this touchy subject.

It takes a lot of work for two parents to get to the point where they can say their co-parenting relationship is actually going really well. For most families, there is much room for improvement. Rather than focusing on what's not working, though, identify what is going well so that you can accentuate the positive as work toward resolving conflicts with your ex. The following signs are evidence indicators of a healthy and productive co-parenting relationship. As you read them, consider what already works for you, as well as those areas you hope to improve:

Clear Boundaries:

It's much easier to work together as co-parents when you establish boundaries and recognize what you have control over – and what you don't – regarding your children and your ex. For example, you cannot control whom your ex dates, or even whether he or she introduces that person to your children (unless it's written into your custody agreement or parenting plan). You can, however, control the example you're setting for your kids when it comes to dealing with disappointments and setbacks.

Predetermined Schedule:

Parenting time transitions are more manageable for everyone involved when the schedule represents a solid, predetermined routine, rather than an iffy, "we'll see" type of arrangement. Parents who've reached a healthy level of communication know that they can count on the other parent to maintain his or her commitments unless something truly extraordinary requires a change in the routine.

Willingness to Be Flexible:

While routine is healthy, it's also important to be flexible with one another. A healthy approach is to be as accommodating with your ex as you'd like him or her to be with you. Even if you suspect that the same courtesy may not be returned to you, demonstrating the way you'd like things to be between you can be more effective than repeatedly telling him or her that the current arrangement isn't working or displeases you.

Defer to One Another for Child Care:

This is another sign of a healthy co-parenting relationship. Parents who work well together and collaborate as parents will call one another before leaving the kids with a babysitter. Some families actually write this intention into their parenting plan, but whether you take that formal step or not, it's just common courtesy to ask your ex if he or she would be willing to take the kids rather than leaving them with a sitter.

Basically Agree:

No two parents are going to agree on each and every decision. However, co-parents who work together well for the sake of their kids have reached a basic level of agreement on the most important things – like issues pertaining to their children's health, education, and spiritual upbringing. In some cases, the use of a written parenting plan has helped co-parents reach this healthy level of communication.

No Effort to Manipulate:

Parents who share a good, healthy co-parenting relationship do not attempt to manipulate one another or control their children's allegiances. They recognize that their children need to have relationships with both parents and that their children's affection for the other parent is no personal threat to them.

Talk to One Another About Schedule Changes:

When last minute changes are needed, parents who share a healthy co-parenting relationship make an effort to talk with one another first, before announcing schedule changes to the children. Some families find it helpful to include guidelines for handling schedule changes in their parenting plan, as well.

Their Children Think They Get Along Pretty Well:

Generally, the kids of co-parents who work well together believe that their parents get along. This doesn't mean that they necessarily agree on everything or even like one another, but they do show respect to each other in front of their children, and they've learned how to communicate in ways that minimize conflict.

Are Able to Attend School and Extra-Curricular Events Without Tension:

Having no problem attending school meetings, sporting events, and recitals when the other parent is present, is another sign of an effective co-parenting relationship. These parents choose to put their children first and worries about what "others" think last.

Recognize Each Other as Significant Influences in Their Kids' Lives:

Co-parents who share a healthy relationship are also well aware of how important they both are to their children. They've worked hard to get to the point where they can work well with each other, because they value their children's opportunity to know and spend time with the other parent, and even though it's hard sometimes, they wouldn't have it any other way.

Co-Parenting Agreements:

If you and your (ex) partner want to raise your children collectively and cooperatively, co-parenting agreements can help improve your focus. Find out how planning an agreement together may turn both of you into better parents.

Information about Co-Parenting:

In short, co-parenting means both parents work together in a cooperative manner to raise healthy, happy and well-balanced children. This type of parenting puts a large portion of the family focus directly on the children and requires certain skills that may seem elusive to some adults. The introduction of an agreement between both parents assures that everyone involved with raising the children adheres to similar values and works towards the same goals.

Who Needs a Parenting Agreement:

No matter the circumstances, all parents and children will benefit from well-crafted co-parenting agreements. However, most parents who are still together and reside in the same home never think about implementing an agreement to care for their children. Some situations that commonly rely on agreements of this type include divorced families, parents who were never married and don't live together, separated parents, parents in crisis (emotional, mental, physical, etc.) and teenage parents.

Although somewhat rare, family advocates counselors and social workers often recommend some form of cooperative parenting statement for intact families due to the success of these agreements when used in special circumstances.

It may become more and more common to have cooperative agreements between parents in the future, even when the parents live together and have no special needs.

Elements of Co-Parenting Agreements:

An agreement between parents or custodians about how to raise their kids is a serious matter. For best results, all parties included in the contract (parents, god-parents, grandparents, etc.) must sit down together and work out the details in a

cooperative manner. If you believe your children will benefit from such an agreement, browse the options below to find the best elements for your family.

Married and Non-Married Parents:

It might seem silly for married people to draft a contract for cooperative parenting, but having a document like this can serve as a guideline for raising children and prevent misunderstandings down the road. When parents agree on key issues early on, children tend to grow up to be confident, emotionally secure and successful. This also applies to parents who live together as a couple, but were never married.

Points to consider when coming up with a document include:

- Religion
- Education
- Extra-curricular activities
- Bedtimes by age
- Childcare
- Diet and nutrition
- Internet usage and TV/video game time
- Dating rules
- Parental roles and responsibilities
- Discipline
- Morals and family values
- Long-term parental expectations
- Spontaneous or emergency decision-making guidelines

Divorced and Separated Parents:

Having a written agreement is crucial to the nurturing of children after divorce. Since it's a time of massive upheaval, formulating a set of firm guidelines can keep your children grounded before, during and after the break-up, while also

imbuing them with feelings of consistency and safe security. Although they may protest the idea itself, children respond favorably to most parenting contracts on the long term.

In addition to the items present in a married couple's agreement, points to consider include:

- Child custody
- Child support
- Residential scheduling
- Visitation plans
- Custody during holidays
- Financial responsibilities
- Emergency procedures
- Grandparent visitation plans
- Gift-giving guidelines
- Child-related communication procedures
- Last testament and will

Unmarried Parents Who Split Up:

Although this case is special, unmarried parents who decide to split should also have a firm agreement about the children before doing so. In fact, it is important to draft such an agreement before children even enter the picture. If the break-up is especially bitter or suffused with anger, a previously established, legally binding agreement helps to lighten the already hefty load suddenly placed upon the shoulders of both parents. Having everything about the kids in writing means one less thing for you and your ex to battle over.

In general, co-parenting agreements between unmarried parents bear a strong resemblance to more traditional contracts, but you or your ex may want to include the following items or addenda:

Role and obligations: While not an actual agreement point, establishing and including paternal and maternal information in the agreement ensures a parent's right to raise his/her children and a mother or father's right to secure financial support for the kids.

- Children's legal last name
- Legal or joint custody
- Long-term legal procedures during emergencies

Follow Through:

Even if you and your co-parent have documented a comprehensive, all-inclusive agreement, the document has no purpose if both parents do not make a concerted effort to follow it. Give your children and yourselves a leg-up in the world by adhering to all agreed-upon elements right from the start. If you need additional help in sorting through co-parenting issues that have come up in your family, consider finding a co-parenting program in your area.

Whether you are recently divorced or have been for some time, don't be anxious that you have ruined your child's life. You haven't. While divorce can be a big part of your child's life, what will determine his ultimate quality of life is still in the hands of each parent. Can children be affected negatively by their parent's divorce? Most certainly. But it's important to understand that children are not necessarily doomed to be negatively impacted.

Here's an important rule: You are the only one in charge when your kids are with you. The key is to make rules and enforce those that support your principles.

Related: Finding it hard to stay calm after a divorce?

Let's take a closer look at a few common situations that arise and how you can best handle them so your child doesn't get caught in the crossfire.

Accept the fact that you may fall apart. Understand that it is normal and natural to fall apart right after the divorce. Divorce marks the end of a relationship, and as with any death, there is a grieving process we go through when we call it quits with our spouse—regardless of how amicable the split is. You may feel overwhelmed, sad, angry, and less patient in general. Your child's behavior will likely be affected as well. She will go through her own grieving process, but added to that are her worries about her parents, how to transition between Mom and Dad's house, how to deal with the rules at each house, and what the future will hold.

But here's the truth: you are entitled to fall apart. You do not have to hide all your sad and difficult feelings from your child. This is different from over-sharing with your child or telling her too much about your personal life or your relationship with your ex. Doing this is a mistake because it forces your child into an adult position, making her your confidant. It can also create a bias against the other parent. Rather, just let your child know you are having a hard time and that you will get better.

Don't forego consequences out of guilt. Many, many parents skip giving consequences after a divorce because they feel guilty about what they have done to their child's life. The danger is that this can become a habit, and your child may then develop some pretty ugly behaviors as a result.

Related: How to give consequences that stick.

Many kids act out as a reaction to the stress, anxiety and sadness they feel over the split of their parents. But remember the best thing you can do for your child

right now is be consistent. Yes, be empathetic to your kids—they are going through a rough time, too—but hold the line when they cross the line. If your teen keeps breaking curfew, give her the same consequence you would have given before.

If your 10-year-old son calls you names and screams in your face, again, follow through with some appropriate discipline. Be sure to talk with your child after everyone has calmed down and find out what’s going on with him or her. Be open to talk about the divorce and their feelings around it if the subject comes up and try to really listen to what your child has to say.

When your child over-functions: Kids react to divorce in different ways. Your son might attempt to take care of you so as not to make any trouble. He might try to take on the missing parent’s role and act like an adult instead of a child. Your daughter might become an overachiever—or an underachiever. Children often over-function for their parents after a divorce because there’s a vacuum that’s been left.

They move right into it because they feel like they have to take up that “missing” role. What will help your child the most is if you can assure him that the best thing he can do right now is just be a kid and live his own life. As a parent, you can remind your kids by your actions and your words that they do not need to take care of you. Although you are going through a rough period, let them know that you are still able to take care of yourself and your family.

When your child acts out:

There are a million reasons why kids act out after a divorce. Here are some of the most common:

- The unwanted changes in their life
- They feel out of control

- They're angry, sad or scared
- They hope the parents will get back together
- They are testing boundaries and trying to push you to be strong.
- They feel like the divorce is their fault

Some kids act out right after a divorce in an attempt to push you to be strong. If your child is acting out, it can be helpful to understand that his behavior might be coming from his anxiety about the divorce. It makes kids nervous when their parents seem to have lost strength. If your kid is pushing you in all different ways, it could be that he's hoping that he sees a parent that doesn't break.

Related: How to deal with your child's acting out behavior calmly and effectively.

If that's going on in your home, again, you can empathize and understand where these behaviors might be coming from, but you don't have to put up with it. Let your child know that it will be most helpful that he be more cooperative and not give you a hard time. Then set limits with him, give consequences and follow through.

When you parent differently from your ex. One of the reasons that you got divorced might have been because you had a hard time agreeing on most things. Being divorced is not going to make that any easier. The good news is that when you are with your kids, your ex cannot tell you what to do. And of course, you can't tell him or her what to do, either—or how to parent.

[Note: Unless there is a case of proven abuse or neglect, you do not have control over how your ex will parent your child. Courts usually back the rule that what a parent does when she is with her child is her business, no one else's, other than when true abuse and/or neglect is present.]

Here's an important rule: You are the only one in charge when your kids are with you. The key is to make rules and enforce those that support your principles. Expect your child to follow your rules in your home and don't worry about what is going on in the other home.

Related: How to stop doing too much for your child.

Of course it is beneficial to work together and to call and collaborate when it comes to parenting your child, if possible. You can suggest things, let your ex know your concerns, stay open and listen to his or her concerns, and then decide for yourself what you will or won't do. You can try to discuss your parenting ideas, but if your ex is not on board, get out of his or her box and stay focused on your parenting values in your home.

When your ex complains about your parenting style the answer to your ex if she complains about your parenting is to say, "I'm good with how I'm doing things." Or "I'm comfortable with how I'm doing things." If she continues to complain, again repeat, "I am good with how I am doing things." Do not engage in any more conversations about this topic. Along the same lines, don't go crazy about how she is parenting. What matters is how you are parenting when your kids are with you. That influence will make a big difference as to how your child does in life.

Related: How to parent effectively after divorce:

Don't put your child in the middle. Children can get caught in the middle when parents put them in the middle. Kids don't want to take sides—they want to be free of worrying about the other parent when they are with you. Don't talk to them about your ex in a way that will force them to take sides. Let's say your son says, "Dad says you don't help me enough with schoolwork." As long as you believe you're doing your best with that, instead of saying "That's not true!" or unleashing some choice words about your ex-spouse tries to respond non-defensively.

You can say, “I think we’re doing a good job together. I’m sorry your father feels that way.” By doing that you have successfully ended the battle and gotten your child out of the middle. It also sends the message to your child that the other parent can do or say whatever he wants, but it doesn’t matter when your child is with you. You are not getting engaged in the battle.

The rule of thumb as a parent is to never say anything to your child negatively about the other parent if at all possible. You may have to bite your tongue, but it is so important that you try to refrain from criticizing your ex. By doing this, you’ll be helping your child have healthy relationships with both parents, and that’s probably what we all want in the long run.

When kids play parents off each other. A by-product of divorce is that sometimes kids will play parents off one another. It’s a source of power for them that, quite frankly, often works. You’ll hear things like, “Mom says I don’t have to go for extra help at school if I don’t want to.” Or “Dad lets me stay up until 10 p.m.” The bottom line is that children will often use that edge to manipulate you to get what they want. When you catch your child doing this, simply pause and say, “When you are in my house, you follow my rules. If you’re in Dad’s house, you follow Dad’s rules. I don’t have jurisdiction over what Dad does, and he doesn’t have jurisdiction over what I do.”

Here’s what you can do to prevent their manipulation from becoming effective: Check with the other parent directly. If the other parent has changed the rule or the plans, you can either agree with this change or disagree and negotiate with each other as adults. Don’t get into the habit of relaying messages through your child. If you have a message or question, call the other parent directly.

Related: What to do when your child is using manipulative behavior:

If your child lies about what the other parent said and then tries to hide it, confront him with it. You can say, “I talked to your mom and she did not say that. I don’t want you lying to me.” When you do this, you are basically letting your child know that you are dealing directly at all times with your ex, and that he can’t get away with playing you off the other parent.

Transitioning between houses. Many, many kids have difficulty transitioning back and forth between houses each week. On the day they arrive home, they might act out by throwing tantrums, having outbursts or by “acting in” and shutting the door to their room and refusing to speak. Why do they do this? They might be testing you to see if you are strong and steady. They may have kept it together when with the other parent and now are letting loose with you. They may be expressing their anger at the disruption in their lives and their wish for you to be back together as a family. Sometimes kids will be a problem on purpose because they hope their parents will get together around this “difficult child.”

Be empathetic to the feelings that might drive these behaviors. After all, your kids are impacted by something that they did not have any control over, nor did they probably want. Keep in mind, however, that you do not need to put up with the behavior. When you talk with your child about it, you might first reflect her feelings: “You sound angry. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” Or “You sound sad. It must be hard to leave Dad’s house and know you won’t see him for a few days.” If your child continues to have tantrums, ignore them the best you can; respond only when your child has calmed herself down.

Whenever your child transitions in a positive way, acknowledge the good behavior: “Boy, I noticed this week when you came back home, you were pretty calm and in control. I know that’s difficult for you and I really appreciate you keeping it together.”

You can also set some consequences if and when necessary. To keep your mind at ease and help you stay calm, recognize that how your child will turn out has the most to do with the relationship that she develops and maintains with each parent. Divorce is not the only factor that will impact her life. How maturely you behave with your ex will keep your child out of emotional harm's way. Having a solid relationship with your child is in your hands.

Co-parenting Teens:

Teens are like toddlers on hormones who want and need to separate from you. Parenting them under any circumstances can be tough, but co-parenting teens that move between two households presents particular challenges. The following are a few common issues that face co-parents, and some language you might use when communicating with your ex, whether the separation or divorce occurs later in your child's life or your kids are young and you're setting up a plan until they turn 18.

1. Authorizing a minor child's driver's license, and providing a car for the child to drive:

We all know how important driving is to teens. A car should not be used as a tool to lure a teen into spending time at a parent's home. Unless you're sharing your car with your teen, the car should travel with him or her and not to be held for exclusive use in the home of the parent who purchased it.

2. Toys, Cell Phones, laptops, iPods and Clothing: Co-parents need to cooperate by permitting toys and clothing to move freely between households whenever it is reasonable. As each child gets older, he or she can be reasonably expected to remember to bring particular items they may want. If one of the adults has a special request regarding the return or use of a particular item, that request can be made directly to the other parent, outside of the children's' presence.

3. Permission for tattoos, piercing's, and other alterations of the child's body: I think it's perfectly reasonable co-parenting etiquette for parents to discuss a child's haircut before it happens. When children know you're talking about them in a productive way, even about seemingly small matters, it can make them feel more secure. Tattoos and piercing's are more permanent alterations and therefore they are larger issues that should carry a higher degree of communication and agreement.

4. Employment prior to the age of 16, 17 or 18 years: Whether your child is interested in working in a shop, restaurant, babysitting, modeling or acting, employment discussions are another example of co-parent cooperation that helps children grow the kind of resilience they need to navigate the passage between two homes.

5. Enrollment or termination of attendance in school or university, marriage before the age of 18 years, and/or joining a branch of the military service: School attendance may be a problem, particularly if children are resistant to it. Remember never to lose focus on who is at the center of this. Your first loyalty is to the children. Your child is looking for and finding a safe perch and nest in your world. You two must give mutual consent if you have joint legal custody when it comes to marriage or joining the military.

6. Household Chores and other Routines: I encourage discussion over whether or not co-parents agree to have similar household routines and expectations around chores, bedtimes and restrictions on television viewing and video game playing. Co-parents should think about this in advance and develop a narrative to explain differences and similarities in the households.

7. Teenage Sexuality, Curfews and Substance Use: Unlike other household rules, parents must maintain a mutually consistent set of expectations and rules

regarding teenage sexuality and substance use. They must clearly explain these guidelines to the children and enforce them the same way in both households.

With regard to sexuality, such rules may include an “open door policy” for entertaining children’s friends and partners in each home. Also important are consistent restrictions about sleepovers and protocols involving communication with the parents of children’s’ partners and friends, especially when the situation includes another minor child.

As for teenage substance use, agreements with preplanned consequences for breaking the rules — such as taking away the car — are important. Agreements about using a parental residence for a party and parental supervision, and what degree of tolerance over tobacco and substance use, if any, that each parent is comfortable with requires full knowledge and discussion with the teenager of what the law provides.

The more clarity and definition you have in your co-parenting plan the better. For many of you, the co-parenting plan will be put in the drawer and rarely, if ever, looked at again. However, thinking these issues through and taking them seriously will make a world of difference in the smooth functioning of your child’s life when moving between households.

It’s never easy answers in parenting but to do your best in teaching your children between wrong and right. Lives in general are not bed of roses and have to work hard in your life and there will be good and bad days. Parents teach their children not to make the same mistakes they made in their own lives and want the best for their children better lives as they grow into adulthood.

If most parents knew some simple principles and truths about how to make their children's lives better, they would, in most cases, respect the value of learning to cooperate with each other. Co-parent counseling helps parents learn to

communicate effectively in a business-like fashion, leave out the emotions involved, and solely focus on the children. Unfortunately, parents "lose site" what is important...their children and get "caught up" in what the other parent is saying or doing that may seem unfair (emotions).

Co-parent counseling can be conceptually divided into two parts. The first part is to help restructure the parents' communication so they can learn to more effectively and safely approach each other, and the second part is to address outstanding issues involving their children that can range from behavioral problems to scheduling difficulties, etc. It is imperative that parents relearn communication patterns since it has been consistently shown that if the communication between parents isn't improved right away, co-parent counseling will fail.

When co-parent counseling works, it seems as if many of the children's problems magically "disappear," indicating that many of the problems that children experience through the process of divorce are either caused or exacerbated by parents who can't or won't cooperate with each other for the sake of their children. Parents that work together for their children will be amazed at how well their children will positively respond.

Working with clients who are often hostile and resentful requires that a therapist possess the ability to be both directive and strategic in his or her approach. It is also essential to be familiar with the developmental stages of children, the dynamics, dilemmas and problems of divorce (both for parents and for children) and to have a dynamic approach to working with couples.

For most children, divorce or separation is a traumatic event that requires time, effort and support from both parents in order to heal. The single best thing that parents can do to help their children through this process is to learn to cooperate

for the sake of the children by reaffirming and maintaining a commitment to their parental obligations and responsibilities.

Divorce or separation is perhaps hardest on children as they are usually forced to transition between two different households. It is also useful to keep in mind that while each parent is missing the children some percentage of time, the children are missing one parent 100% of the time.

Tantrums and Meltdowns:

When a child doesn't get their way they sometimes throw a tantrum will come as no surprise to parents that the most common problem that brings young children to the attention of a psychologist or psychiatrist is emotional outbursts—tantrums and meltdowns. The child will be on the offensive even say out of anger, “ I hate you and I what to be with Mommy or Daddy” Don't take this to heart. They don't mean it, it's just out of anger for not getting their way.

Indeed, tantrums and meltdowns are among the biggest challenges of parenting. They're hard to understand, hard to prevent, and even harder to respond to effectively when they're happening. And when they occur with frequency past the age in which they're developmentally expected—those terrible twos—they can become a big problem for the child, not just the beleaguered adults who endure them.

Tantrums vs. meltdowns:

Many people make a distinction between tantrums and meltdowns, though neither is a clinical term. “Tantrum” is commonly used to describe milder outbursts, during which a child still retains some measure of control over his behavior. One benchmark many parents use is that a tantrum is likely to subside if no one is paying attention to it. This is opposed to a meltdown, during which a child loses

control so completely that the behavior only stops when he wears himself out and/or the parent is able to calm him down.

Whether mild or severe, tantrums are symptoms that a child is struggling with emotions she can't regulate. Anger, of course, is the No. 1 emotion that causes children to lose their heads and blow up—think of it as the kid version of road rage, says child and adolescent psychiatrist Steven Dickstein. The child feels she deserves or needs something that is being deliberately withheld from her—the cookie, the video game, something she covets at the toy store—and is overwhelmed by her frustration and sense of injustice.

But anxiety is another big trigger; it causes kids to freak out, overriding the logic that would enable her to see that her anxiety is out of proportion to the situation. When children don't develop emotional regulation as part of normal development, the causes are varied. "The thing is, there's no such thing as tantrum disorder, or meltdown disorder." Tantrums and meltdowns are like fevers—they can be triggered by so many different problems that we can't make them stop until we understand what's triggering them.

Sometimes the inability to regulate emotions is the result of an underlying problem. Some of the common causes of frequent meltdowns are:

ADHD: In a recent study more than 75 percent of children who presented with severe temper outbursts also fit the criteria for ADHD. That doesn't necessarily mean they've been diagnosed with ADHD—in fact the disorder may be overlooked in kids who have a history of aggression. "What people don't understand is that a lack of focus, an inability to complete work and tolerate boredom, among other symptoms, can contribute to the escalation toward the explosive outbursts," So you have to get to the underlying cause."

Anxiety: Anxiety is another major contributor. Even if kids don't have a full-blown anxiety disorder, they may still be over reactive to anxiety-provoking situations and melt down when they are stressed. Kids who have undiagnosed learning disabilities or who have suffered trauma or neglect may react this way when confronted with an uncomfortable or painful situation.

Learning problems: When your child acts out repeatedly in school or during homework time, it's possible that he has an undiagnosed learning disorder. Say he has a lot of trouble with math, and math problems make him very frustrated and irritable. Rather than ask for help, he may rip up an assignment or start something with another child to create a diversion from his real issues.

Depression and irritability: Depression and irritability also occur in a subset of kids who have severe and frequent temper tantrums. A new disorder called disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, or DMDD, describes kids who have severe outbursts with chronic severe irritability in between. "Kids who are highly irritable are like water at 90 degrees—always on the cusp of boiling." Parents of these kids are always walking on eggshells because they respond to very subtle things, like the slightest thing not going their way.

Autism: Children on the autism spectrum are also often prone to dramatic meltdowns. These children tend to be rigid—dependent on consistent routine for their emotional comfort—and any unexpected change can set them off. And they may lack the language and communication skills to express what they want or need.

Sensory processing issues: Sensory processing challenges, often seen in autistic children and teens as well as many with ADHD, may cause kids to be overwhelmed by stimulation, and short-circuit in inconsolable meltdowns.

Skills that may be lacking

Whatever the trigger, most mental health professionals believe that children who have frequent emotional outbursts are lacking certain skills that would help them better handle situations that cause them frustration, anxiety or anger. They include:

- Impulse control
- Problem solving
- Delaying gratification
- Negotiating
- Communicating wishes and needs to adults
- Knowing what's appropriate or expected in a given situation
- Self-soothing

Common Mistakes of Co-parenting:

As the divorce rates continue to trend upwards in America, many parents are finding themselves with a new challenge to face. At Anchor Counseling we recognize this trend. Once a marriage has officially dissolved, many people would like to close the proverbial door on that chapter of their lives. However, when children are involved, the ex-spouses are forever linked in that very special way. Through my work with counseling co-parents, I have discovered some common road blocks many couples stumble over preventing them from successful co-parenting their children.

One of the hardest aspects most co-parents will face is trying to move past the residual emotions left behind from the dissolved relationship. The separation process tends to leave a trail of resentment, pain, and mistrust for different reasons; yet, in order for successful co-parenting to occur, these emotions have be left out of the process. This is certainly easier said than done, which is why parents are encouraged to find their own appropriate outlet for these emotions

talking to a family member or friend, exercise, yoga, relaxation techniques, reading, and any other healthy stress-relieving activity.

Although using the phone to vent to a trusted support can be helpful, make sure you are aware of your surroundings. Children are often extremely curious about the details regarding these situations, and they can be quite adept at eavesdropping on phone conversations. Make sure to double-check for “little ears” and find a remote location before expressing your frustrations regarding your ex-partner.

When you are speaking to your child (or if he/she is in earshot), please refrain from saying anything negative regarding the other parent. I typically encourage co-parents to keep it either positive or neutral when discussing the other parent with the child, and if this is too difficult, I revert back to the old saying, “If you have nothing nice to say, don’t say anything at all”. Children can be quite impressionable, and negative comments about the other parent can be full of impact and confusing. Most children have a difficult time dealing with a fundamental shift in their family’s dynamics, and any added confusion is not helpful. As best as you possibly can, you want to encourage the child to have a positive relationship with the other parent.

Although the other parent may have been a poor spouse, he/she might have some positive aspects to their parenting from which your child could benefit.

As children grow, they will discover which parent(s) are there for them, which parent(s) they can trust, and which parent(s) truly love them. If you do your part, they will come to respect you for it when they get older. If the other parent does not do their part, the child will recognize this as they mature – you don’t need to point it out to them every step along the way.

Often times throughout co-parenting, the child will need to transition from one parent's care to the other's care. These transition times can be impressionable for the child, and they provide another opportunity to successfully co-parent. In order for these interactions to be positive, both parents need to demonstrate a level of respect for the other person. For the sake of the child, each parent should interact in a positive and cooperative way during these transitions.

A child can be quite in tune to a parent's affect and body language, so each parent should be aware of how he/she is presenting during these transition times. Each parent needs to demonstrate respect in what they say, as well as how they act. If one parent is going to be late for the transition meeting, he/she should alert the other party to inform them of this development, therefore demonstrating respect for the other parent's time and schedule. Role modeling a healthy and respectful relationship with the other parent can be tremendously influential to the child's development and happiness.

Co-parenting with an ex-partner can seem overwhelming, unbearable, and downright impossible at times. However, when co-parenting is done correctly (through respect, healthy communication, and positive transitions), this process can become a little easier. If you find yourself in this situation, please remember to keep the best interest of this child first and foremost. When this perspective is taken, the co-parenting process can be successful. Remember that you can only control yourself. If you focus your efforts on becoming the best co-parent that you can be, hopefully the other parent will follow suit.

“Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox” (Proverbs 14:4, ESV). You might be wondering how that verse pertains to parenting. Let me explain. The proverb points out that while you might want none of the challenging and dirty responsibilities that come with caring for a manger, the clean manger means you have no oxen. If you have no oxen then you

will not have an abundant of crops or any crops at all. Blessed with oxen comes with certain challenges, but they are well worth it. The rewards of having them far outweigh the cost of caring for them.

This is true for parenting. Scripture tells us that children are a blessing from the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5). As parents, we have particular challenges because we have been blessed with children. We face certain challenges as we strive to reach the biblical directive of Ephesians 6:4, to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Three of these wonderful challenges are described in the form of general guidelines we ought to keep in mind as we look for practical suggestions to flesh out the biblical mandate found in Ephesians 6:4.

Wonderful Challenge #1: Having the Right Motives

Pleasing God vs. Pleasing Self:

Outcome driven is a temptation. We want our children to behave and perform a certain way and that is often driven by a desire to maintain a personally comfortable and enjoyable environment. When faced with uncooperative and disobedient children who do not act the way we want them to we are tempted to go after “whatever works.” We go from one parenting fad to the next. Some will utilize unbiblical means and justify their use of those means by saying, “Well, it works.” In Numbers 20:8-13, Moses gets the water for the people (the end) but is judged by God for his anger against the people shown by his striking of the rock (the means). To God the means are as important as the end.

Therefore, our parenting must be driven by the glory of God not my personal happiness (1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 5:9). This means I cannot see children as a gift from God only for my own pleasure; they belong to Him. Further, this means that when a child disobeys, the problem is not that my own

happiness has been interrupted. Our instruction and discipline must be driven by the Glory of God lest there be no God-blessed change.

Furthermore, we see problems as opportunities for training and teaching our children for God's glory and pleasure. This implies that we not measure our parenting by our children's responses and behavior. Our obedience to Scripture with the right motive makes us faithful parents, not the outcome of our child's behavior.

Pleasing God vs. Pleasing Others:

We do not allow ourselves to be motivated by comparing our children with others (Galatians 1:10; Colossians 3:22; 2 Corinthians 10:12). We definitely learn from each other, but we do not use others as the standard by which we and our children must live. Likewise, we do not view our standards as the most "spiritual" and judge others accordingly.

Trust vs. Fear (Proverbs 3:5-8; 1 John 4:16-18)

Some parents fear that without abundant training, or strict adherence to specific methods, their child will turn out to be a failure, a social embarrassment, or deny the faith. Trusting God means that we study Scripture to learn biblical principles for all areas of our lives. We ask questions that will help us be wise in applying those principles. We learn skillful living from older, wiser saints. We trust God to guide us and we trust Him for the outcome of our choices.

Trusting God provides hope in light of the fact that we fail many times as parents. We do not always make the best decision in every situation. However, we rest in the fact that God's will is not thwarted by our mistakes (Job 42:2). God only requires from us that we be faithful (1 Corinthians 4:2).

Wonderful Challenge #2: Having the Right Focus

Parenting Is Not Complicated:

How easily we can complicate parenting. Sometimes we want more answers than what the Bible provides and so out of fear we create our own complex system or follow someone else's multi-step method. This often breeds a false sense of confidence by substituting a particular parenting system for the faithful application of God's Word.

Variety of Ways to Apply Biblical Truth:

When dealing with matters not specifically addressed in Scriptures, we must be governed by love for others and showing deference to others (Galatians 5:13; Romans 14:19). Personal preferences are not inherently wrong, but should not be equated with biblical directives. We can consider the practical suggestions of others but must make decisions as to what is best for our own family. Furthermore, we need to make clear distinctions, as much as possible, between what is a biblical mandate and what is personal opinion.

Parenting Does Not Involve "Quick Fixes"

Parenting requires perseverance (Galatians 6:9). We persevere in teaching, disciplining and praying. It takes time to get to the heart of the matter in order to gain a character that lasts a lifetime. Children learn little by little and day by day and we all need to love, support and forgive one another through successes and failure. James 1 and 2 Peter 1 remind us that steadfastness and perseverance produce godliness and completion in Christ. Let us not short-circuit the sanctifying work parenting provides, both for our children and us.

Limitations of Parental Influence:

We cannot control the results of our parenting – God does (Philippians 1:6). We are faithful with what we know is right with the right motives. We cannot change

a child's heart. Ultimately, our children are accountable to God (Ezekiel 18; Romans 14:12).

Wonderful Challenge #3: Having the Right Balance

External and Internal (Matthew 5 & 6; 23:23-24, 27-28)

We can sometimes focus on controlling our child's behavior without using Scripture and prayer to deal with his or her heart.

Shepherding Your Child's Heart:

“A parent can simply focus on the external justice and fairness involved in a fight over a toy and simply decide who had it first, or get a watch to time them each for a turn. That might help a 2-year old whose reasoning is still limited. But children need to be patiently and lovingly led to learn to give up their ‘rights’ and prefer others in love, not just ‘take turns’”.

Freedom and Responsibility (Galatians 5:13-14; 1 Peter 2:16)

We are careful not to give our children too much freedom on one hand with no balancing restrictions and responsibilities on the other. We allow a child more freedom as the child learns self-control. However, unnecessary control will not allow a child to learn from failing. Mistakes make great teachers.

Friendship and Authority

We must balance our friendship with our children and our authority over them. On one hand, we must not allow our children to progress to this peer relationship too quickly or we may jeopardize their ability to understand the biblical requirement that children submit to parental authority and teaching. On the other hand, if we are heavy-handed with authority, we may stifle the progress toward a wonderful, lifetime friendship.

Major Issues and Minor Issues (Matthew 23:23-24)

We should not be overbearing on issues that are not clearly biblical. For example, we need to be more concerned with the child who lies about brushing her teeth than the child who brushed his teeth and missed a piece of food. Disobedience and lying is a heart issue; grooming may not be.

Parenting as the Sole Focus of the Christian Life and Parenting as an Important Aspect of the Christian Life.

We must keep in mind that we are more than parents. We should have a biblically accurate perspective of our priorities. Raising our children is part of a grander scheme. As important as it is, it cannot be the center of our lives, which everything else revolves. As we keep the eternal perspective in mind, our role as parents will be kept in balance with every other important duty.

Our goal as parents—being faithful in applying biblical principles—is not complicated. But we face challenges in meeting the goal. We must have the right motivation, focus, and balance. These challenges keep us on our knees so that our parenting is part of our walk of faith. Parenting is a wonderful opportunity to trust God.

God gives the grace and wisdom to keep the priorities and goal in mind and face the challenges of parenting for His glory.

“Must we argue again?”

Many women have told me they don't want to keep arguing with their spouse or child, yet they continue arguing. It almost seems the mouth goes on auto-pilot, but God's Word is clear that the words of our mouth really come from the heart (Luke 6:45). At that moment, what seems most important is getting what we want, even if we have to sin in order to get it.

It is the heart's desires that drive passionate arguments (James 4:1).

We want something that conflicts with what another wants, so we fight and quarrel until we get it, or get mad because we didn't get what we wanted, or got what we didn't want! Idolatry is the biblical term for wanting something so bad we sin to get it, or sin by our words, attitudes, and reactions when we don't get what we want.

Choose to Think Like Christ:

So why does anyone keep arguing when we know it is wrong, and it is counter-productive?

Titus 3 begins with a discussion about authorities and respect for them, about being peaceable, gentle, humble instead of hateful, self-centered. Is it not our selfish desires that become the dictators, telling us what to argue for and to keep going until we get what we want? We set ourselves up as our own authority, our own little god, determining what is valuable for us to attain.

Other human authorities (parents, spouse, or boss) and even God, are disregarded. Pride rules.

At that moment when we are tempted to argue, we must change gears in our thinking, allowing gentleness and humility to point us to peace so we can quit arguing. We must see that whatever we desire in no way compares to the abundant mercies and grace of our Lord and the life He has given us.

Our thinking must focus on eternal values and Christ like if we are to change and develop the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11). It is the put off /put on principle, replacing our old way of responding (arguing for what we want) with humility and gentleness, that will help us to change permanently.

Replacement thinking must begin long before an argument begins, because in the heat of the moment, we tend to toss all godly reasoning out the window to welcome instead an idolatrous desire. By daily renewing our minds in the principles of the Word, change begins to shape our thoughts and desires into those of Christ (Romans 12:1-2). We begin to desire humility and wisdom rather than conforming to the culture around us which daily bombards us with anger, rebellion, selfishness, arrogance, and rights.

Growth and maturity take time, so we should seize every opportunity to practice gentleness and humility and to renew our minds in Christ like.

Choose to Talk Like Christ:

We must choose to talk and act in His character instead of reacting on our flesh's desire, which only destroys relationships (James 4:1-12). We may not literally kill the other person, but our arguments may kill the marriage or friendship! They always hurt the other person.

Must we argue our angry words never lead to a righteous end (James 1:19,20). All words have either the power of life or death (Proverbs 18:21), so they can build up and encourage another person, or tear down and destroy that person (Ephesians 4:29-30). It grieves the Lord when one of His kids tears down another one of His kids because HE loves them both, and at that moment one or both are totally disregarding His character and His commands using words for selfish goals or to destroy the opponent.

There is a righteous way to address problems in love and honesty (Ephesians 4:15, 25), with a goal to help the person and to solve a problem.

Words that we speak are so important because they directly reflect our heart's desire. They expose whether we desire to honor the Lord or to get what we want. They declare who is really the Lord of our life, Christ or self. We should pray

with David, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer”(Psalm 19:14).

Only the Holy Spirit has the power to convict us of our words and to help us replace them with acceptable words!

Choose to Act like Christ:

We can choose to act in His character as heirs of His grace and mercy, living out the good works he calls us to do (Titus 3:1-9). This passage ends with an admonition to avoid foolish disputes, worthless argument. That is a reflection of a heart change where the words and actions change to match the New Creation in Christ Jesus. Acting in kindness and forgiveness rather than continuing the angry arguments (Ephesians 4:31-32) become the new way of life that honors the Lord.

Practical Assignments for Change:

Study all the passages in the article above and compare how your communication matches what the Word says about your words. If repentance is in order, go to God and to the others you have offended with your words to ask forgiveness and to commit to a better way to communicate.

Study Proverbs and over the next few weeks and write out every verse that relates to how you communicate to others. Choose the verses to memorize that are most applicable to your words and put the verses into practice to improve.

Journal specific temptations to argue and how you handled the temptation. Did you give in to the argument or did you communicate with gentleness and humility? What could you have done or said in a better way?

Make a list of the issues you find yourself arguing about. Is there a common theme? What does your heart repeatedly desire? Is there an idol of comfort? Pleasure? Acceptance? Security? Ease? Someone’s approval?

Nurture is the structured discipline that moves a child toward maturity and self-control, but admonition plays an increasing role in maturity.

Younger children are to obey their parents, and we parents like that command! But what about the part that requires parents to balance nurture and admonition in order to avoid exasperating the children, provoking them to wrath (anger, rebellion, disobedience).

Parents are never responsible for sinful choices the child/teen makes, but they are responsible for their own parenting style, for the models they follow, and for the ways they model life for their children.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Ephesians 6:4, ESV

I like to visually depict nurture and admonition to parents I counsel as a huge X. Start drawing the X at the top left with Nurture for the Toddler. That means parents lay the groundwork of order (structured time management for meals and bedtimes; reasonable rules with consequences for disobedience and plenty of blessings for obedience). During the preschool years, children are primarily learning about obedience to the authority God has given their parents to teach and train them in obedience to the Lord.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Ephesians 6:1-3, ESV

The bottom left of the X is about Admonition, minimal for the toddler. Admonition helps the maturing child begin to understand God’s heart for him. Admonition is a parent’s heart for God that instructs his child in such a way as to encourage the child to seek God’s heart for himself.

Out of the parents' love for God (Deut. 6) flows the desire to disciple their children in love, which encourages the child to mature in obedience to the Lord (John 14:15,21). As the child increasingly chooses obedience, the focus becomes more Admonition (instruction and counsel) and less Nurture (structured discipline) until the mature young adult functions out of love for God and others rather than out of "Rules."

So the top right side of the X represents Admonition for a mature young adult. The focus completely changes over the years, moving from primarily Nurture in a young child to primarily Admonition in the young adult. The relationship between a parent and their adult children has become counsel and friendship.

Cooperating with your ex partner and successfully parenting after a divorce or separation requires rethinking your entire relationship. The family is changing but it is still there in a different form. Even though it may be hard, try to develop a respectful, cooperative relationship with your ex.

Think of it as a business partnership in which you are working for the good of your children. Keep the focus of all your interactions ONLY on the kids and what is best for them. Your child's emotional and mental health hangs in the balance.

Tips for co-parenting after divorce or separation:

Listen to what your ex is saying. Try to understand. Understanding and accepting your ex's point-of-view is NOT the same as approving. Saying something like, "I understand you feel strongly about that...I'm not sure I agree but I will think about your concerns." would go a long way toward avoiding unproductive and hostile debates.

Don't moralize your preferences. Your ex will choose to do things differently than you do. If you disagree with something your ex is doing, STOP. Think about it before you speak. Is it really true? Do I have my facts straight? Is it unethical? Harmful to the kids? Important? Permanent? OR is it just that I am annoyed with the way he handles things?

So long as the issue isn't harmful, it can actually be good for your children to learn how to adapt to different situations, styles, and approaches. If your child says, "Well, at mom's house she lets us do xyz." A good response would be "Great. At my house we do it this way." If you decide you have a reasonable concern, calm yourself down before you approach your ex. Discuss the issue in a calm and respectful way in private.

Your negative feelings are your responsibility. If you are angry, hurt, anxious, etc. DON'T put that on your children. Talk to a trusted friend or therapist. Exercise. Pray. Take a break. Do what you need to do to calm yourself down in a healthy way.

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Invest in Your Children:

If you need help negotiating the complications of co-parenting after a divorce, consider getting help. Short-term therapy may be a great way to work through some areas of parenting that are especially difficult. At least you both can agree on one thing. You both want your children to grow up to be happy, healthy adults. Think of it as an investment in your children.

Don't put your children between you and your ex. If you need to speak to your ex about something, call, text, or email. Try not to use your children as messengers.

Don't speak disrespectfully about your ex in front of the children and don't allow others to do so. When children hear this, they often feel like they have to choose sides, which is confusing and hurtful. They love and need BOTH parents.

The Golden Rule

Speak to your ex the way you would speak to a co-worker. Keep it short, business-like, and focused on the kids.

When discussing parenting issues with your ex, use language that invites discussion and explores options, rather than being demanding and abrupt.

For example, 'What would you think if...' or 'Would you consider...' 'What if we tried...'

If there ever was a time to apply the Golden Rule, this is it! Treat your ex the way you want to be treated. Kindness and respect invite kindness and respect.

There is a proverb that says, "A soft answer turns away wrath." If your ex is sharp and unkind, try not to return the same. Handle the situation the same way you would handle it if a co-worker were sharp and rude. You would likely first give the benefit of the doubt- 'Maybe he is just having a bad day and it's not personal.' If it continued, you might calmly but firmly call your coworker on his behavior without turning the discussion into a major blow out.

Keep calm communication and peaceful:

Arguing and yelling in front a child can and will be detrimental to that child.

We are all guilty of it. We act like children in front of our kids when we get into an argument with our spouse. It's a sad state of affairs when our sons and daughters get an earful of our immaturity and at the very worst, end up becoming emotionally damaged by it. So why do we do it?

Parents have this magical ability to forget that their children are within earshot of what they are saying. Or they think the children are too young to understand the content of the argument while neglecting to realize that it's the negative tone of the conversation that kids pick up on. Kids do as we do and not as we say, though we often wish the opposite was true. If they see us resolving disputes with petty arguing, they are going to learn the same tactic.

What should we do if we disagree with our spouse while our children are in our presence? Just that. Disagree and drop it for the time being. Shelf the matter until a future moment and bring it back up when the kids are asleep or outside playing.

It's unfair for them to see Mom and Dad fight ugly in front of them and they can't help but take sides. A child should never be in a position where they're choosing one parent over the other. Nothing makes a child more insecure than feeling like Mom and Dad aren't a united team, and if they aren't on the same team, then the child feels like they need to go one way or the other.

One of the worst things to argue about in front of the children is how to parent them. Major parenting decisions should be made before a couple even has children. Things such as sleeping arrangements, schooling, discipline, belief systems, and allowances are some examples of important parenting matters.

Not having a game plan and then fighting about differing parenting styles will do nothing but inspire a lack of respect in your children for Mom and Dad. Get it together and not in front of the children either. If you aren't natural authority figures, then fake it till you make it. Part of being a good parent is about playing the role well.

One of the worst side effects of living in a hostile environment is stress. Stress really shouldn't be a part of a child's life. Some healthy stress such as challenging

school work, the thrill of a new experience, or normal changes in a child's life are good, if not welcome to help him or her grow as a person.

However, the negative stress brought on by living in an unhappy household full of conflict is awful for a child's physical and mental health. Consider this the next time you fight about whether Junior should take soccer versus piano lessons. While you're at it, get your child's input on his preference.

Learn to choose your battles. If you're a nit-picker who constantly takes your mate's inventory, perhaps the problem lies more with you than with him or her. What's more alarming is that you may also parent your children the same way. Brow-beating and berating a child is a sad and ineffective way to motivate, encourage, or inspire him or her to ultimately become the best adult he or she can.

Worst of all, the name-calling that often accompanies an argument can leave a permanent impression on a spouse or a child who may not understand that it was hurled in the heat of the moment.

Is there ever an age that a child reaches when it would be appropriate for him or her to witness an argument between parents? Probably not. No matter how old a child is, whether in grade school, a teenager, or an adult who may also be a parent, hearing his or her parents fight is awkward, uncomfortable, and depressing. It's dubious that even a senior citizen would even feel okay watching his or her parents get into a scrap.

If you do find yourself constantly arguing with your spouse, whether in front of the kids or alone, perhaps you both need to work on your personalities. The library and bookstore are full of self-improvement books that can help you to have a more harmonious marriage. Some people treat strangers more kindly than they treat their mate.

Be nice and respectful to one another and your children will benefit from the peaceful environment in which they are being raised. Learn how to control your temper, manage your anger, and perhaps be a bit more compliant and accommodating, and you'll end up being a more pleasant person to be around in general.

Arguing is about control. One person insists he or she is right while the other is wrong by default. Having to have your own way all the time is a personality problem that needs to be worked on. Picking fights and being nasty make you unlikable in general, but dangerous as a spouse or parent. Consider if hurting everyone's feelings is worth being right. Wouldn't you rather be happy and make others happy in return? Sit down and think about what you can do to be a nicer, more gentle person, spouse, and parent.

If arguing becomes a problem in your marriage and you can't seem to keep it between the two of you, seek counseling. Worse than constantly arguing in front of your children is ultimately getting divorced. Then the children have no choice but to be on Mom or Dad's team" when custody is determined.

Few, if any, children of divorce state that it was a positive experience. Lasting scars are usually the result of a fractured union between parents. If you don't want to make your marriage work for the sake of you and your spouse, consider the kids' feelings. All children deserve to grow up in a peaceful, stable environment!

A child will start to have emotional problems due to parents arguing in front of them, The child may start to withdraw and having an emptiness feeling and feel that they themselves are the cause of their Mom and Dad split.

Parents get side tracked with their own disagreements and problems and sometimes forget with the children are in the room when the argument starts.

The parents at that time frame do not have respect for their children when they argue in front of them. Children may grow up in having bad relationships and even an abusive one.

As the child grows into adulthood within their subconscious mind sometimes don't realize of the past when their own parents were arguing, fighting, and or even abusive acts can have a domino effect past down and may and will cause problem in their own life. Parents don't realize the drama they put their children through.

Now if abused as a child or even witness the abuse of their mother, could in fact as an adult may have tenacity to abusive their own children and even to their own partner in life. This is not a healthy life style to be in. This shows that there is no love within the family. This way of life style is damned and with this will be a mental and physical damage to the whole family.

An alternative to a professional psychologist is recommended for counseling which will and may be needed to heal this family.

The family at this point in time will take a long time to heal and should not be taken lightly, as it will be a journey for the family in the healing process to get to the root of the problems so to move on with their lives and return to the once happy and loving family.

Remember in Philippians 4:13 New King James Version (NKJV)

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Co-parenting tips for divorced parents: Setting hurt and anger aside:

The key to co-parenting is to focus on your children—and your children only. Yes, this can be very difficult. It means that your own emotions—any anger, resentment, or hurt—must take a back seat to the needs of your children. Admittedly, setting aside such strong feelings may be the hardest part of learning

to work cooperatively with your ex, but it's also perhaps the most vital. Co-parenting is not about your feelings, or those of your ex-spouse, but rather about your child's happiness, stability, and future well being.

Separating feelings from behavior

It's okay to be hurt and angry, but your feelings don't have to dictate your behavior. Instead, let what's best for your kids—you working cooperatively with the other parent—motivate your actions.

Get your feelings out somewhere else. Never vent to your child. Friends, therapists, or even a loving pet can all make good listeners when you need to get negative feelings off your chest. Exercise can also be a healthy outlet for letting off steam.

Stay kid-focused. If you feel angry or resentful, try to remember why you need to act with purpose and grace: your child's best interests are at stake. If your anger feels overwhelming, looking at a photograph of your child may help you calm down.

Use your body. Consciously putting your shoulders down, breathing evenly and deeply, and standing erect can keep you distracted from your anger, and can have a relaxing effect.

Children in the middle

You may never completely lose all of your resentment or bitterness about your break up, but what you can do is compartmentalize those feelings and remind yourself that they are your issues, not your child's. Resolve to keep your issues with your ex away from your children.

Never use kids as messengers. When you have your child tell the other parent something for you, it puts him or her in the center of your conflict. The goal is to keep your child out of your relationship issues, so call or email your ex yourself.

Keep your issues to yourself. Never say negative things about your ex to your children, or make them feel like they have to choose. Your child has a right to a relationship with his or her other parent that is free of your influence.

Communicating with your ex

Relieving stress in the moment—no matter who you're dealing with, It may seem impossible to stay calm when dealing with a difficult ex-spouse who's hurt you in the past or has a real knack for pushing your buttons. But by practicing quick stress relief techniques, you can learn to stay in control when the pressure builds.

Quick Stress Relief:

Peaceful, consistent, and purposeful communication with your ex is essential to the success of co-parenting—even though it may seem absolutely impossible. It all begins with your mindset. Think about communication with your ex as having the highest purpose: your child's well being. Before contact with your ex, ask yourself how your talk will affect your child, and resolve to conduct yourself with dignity. Make your child the focal point of every discussion you have with your ex-partner.

Communication with your ex is likely to be a tough task. Remember that it isn't always necessary to meet your ex in person—speaking over the phone or exchanging texts or emails is fine for the majority of conversations. The goal is to establish conflict-free communication, so see which type of contact works best for you. Whether talking via email, phone, or in person, the following methods can help you initiate and maintain effective communication:

Set a business-like tone. Approach the relationship with your ex as a business partnership where your “business” is your children’s well-being. Speak or write to your ex as you would a colleague—with cordiality, respect, and neutrality. Relax and talk slowly.

Make requests. Instead of making statements, which can be misinterpreted as demands, try framing as much as you can as requests. Requests can begin "Would you be willing to...?" or “Can we try...?”

Listen. Communicating with maturity starts with listening. Even if you end up disagreeing with the other parent, you should at least be able to convey to your ex that you’ve understood his or her point of view. And listening does not signify approval, so you won’t lose anything by allowing your ex to voice his or her opinions.

Show restraint. Keep in mind that communicating with one another is going to be necessary for the length of your children's entire childhood—if not longer. You can train yourself to not overreact to your ex, and over time you can become numb to the buttons he or she tries to push.

Commit to meeting/talking consistently. Frequent communication with your ex will convey the message to your children that you and their other parent are a united front. This may be extremely difficult in the early stages of your divorce or separation.

Keep conversations kid-focused. You can control the content of your communication. Never let a discussion with your ex-partner digress into a conversation about your needs or his/her needs; it should always be about your child's needs only.

Improving the relationship with your ex:

If you are truly ready to rebuild trust after a separation or divorce, be sincere about your efforts. Remember your children's best interests as you move forward to improve your relationship.

Ask his or her opinion.

This fairly simple technique can effectively jump-start positive communications between you and your ex. Take an issue that you don't feel strongly about, and ask for your ex's input, showing that you value his or her input.

Apologize. When you're sorry about something, take the time to apologize sincerely—even if the incident happened a long time ago. Apologizing can be very powerful in moving your relationship away from being adversaries.

Chill out:

If a special outing with your ex is going to cut into your time with your child by an hour graciously let it be. Remember that it's all about what is best for your child; plus, when you show flexibility, your ex is more likely to be flexible with you.

Parenting as a team:

Parenting is full of decisions you'll have to make with your ex, whether you like each another or not. Cooperating and communicating without blow-ups or bickering makes decision-making far easier on everybody. If you shoot for consistency, geniality, and teamwork with your ex, the details of child-rearing decisions tend to fall into place.

Aim for consistency:

It's healthy for children to be exposed to different perspectives and to learn to be flexible, but they also need to know they're living under the same basic set of

expectations at each home. Aiming for consistency between your home and your ex's avoids confusion for your children.

Rules:

Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but if you and your ex-spouse establish generally consistent guidelines, your kids won't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments. Important lifestyle rules like homework issues, curfews, and off-limit activities should be followed in both households.

Discipline:

Try to follow similar systems of consequences for broken rules, even if the infraction didn't happen under your roof. So, if your kids have lost TV privileges while at your ex's house, follow through with the restriction. The same can be done for rewarding good behavior.

Schedule:

Where you can, aim for some consistency in your children's schedules. Making meals, homework, and bedtimes similar can go a long way toward your child's adjustment to having two homes.

Important issues:

Major decisions need to be made by both you and your ex. Being open, honest, and straightforward about important issues is crucial to both your relationship with your ex and your children's well-being.

Medical needs:

Effective co-parenting can help parents focus on the best medical care for the child, and can help reduce anxiety for everyone. Whether you decide to designate

one parent to communicate primarily with health care professionals or attend medical appointments together, keep one another in the loop.

Education:

School plays a major role in maintaining a stable environment for your kids, so be sure to let them know about changes in your child's living situation. Speak with your ex ahead of time about class schedules, extra-curricular activities, and parent-teacher conferences, and be polite to him or her at school or sports events.

Financial issues.

The cost of maintaining two separate households can strain your attempts to be effective co-parents. Set a realistic budget and keep accurate records for shared expenses. Be gracious if your ex provides opportunities for your children that you cannot provide.

Disagreements:

As you co-parent, you and your ex are bound to disagree over certain issues. Keep the following in mind as you try to come to consensus with your ex.

Respect can go a long way:

Simple manners are often neglected between co-parents, even though they should be the foundation for co-parenting. Being considerate and respectful includes letting your ex know about school events, being flexible about your schedule when possible, and taking his or her opinion seriously.

Keep talking:

It might sound tedious, but if you disagree about something important, you will need to continue to communicate about the topic. Never discuss your differences of opinions with or in front of your child. If you still can't agree, you may need to talk to a third party, like a therapist or mediator.

Don't sweat the small stuff:

If you disagree about important issues like a medical surgery or choice of school for your child, by all means keep the discussion going. But if you want your child in bed by 7:30 and your ex says 8:00, try to let it go and save your energy for the bigger issues.

Compromise:

Yes, you will need to come around to your ex spouse's point of view as often as he or she comes around to yours. It may not always be your first choice, but compromise allows you both to "win" and makes both of you more likely to be flexible in the future.

Making transitions easier:

The actual move from one household to another, whether it happens every few days or just on weekends, can be a very hard time for children. Transitions represent a major change in your children's reality. Every reunion with one parent is also a separation with the other; each "hello" is also a "goodbye." In joint custody arrangements, transition time is inevitable, but there are many things you can do to help make exchanges and transitions easier, both when your children leave and return.

When your child leaves:

As kids prepare to leave your house for your ex's, try to stay positive and deliver them on time. You can use the following strategies to help make transitions easier:

Help children anticipate change. Remind kids they'll be leaving for the other parent's house a day or two before the visit.

Pack in advance. Depending on their age, help children pack their bags well before they leave so that they don't forget anything they'll miss. Encourage packing familiar reminders like a special stuffed toy or photograph.

Always drop off—never pick up the child on "switch day." It's a good idea to avoid "taking" your child from the other parent so that you don't risk interrupting or curtailing a special moment. Drop off your child at the other parent's house instead.

When your child returns:

The beginning of your children's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. You can try the following to help your child adjust:

Keep things low-key. When children first enter your home, try to have some down time together—read a book or do some other quiet activity.

Double up. To make packing simpler and make kids feel more comfortable when they are at the other parent's house, have kids keep certain basics—toothbrush, hairbrush, and pajamas—at both houses.

Allow the child space. Children often need a little time to adjust to the transition. If they seem to need some space, do something else nearby. In time, things will get back to normal.

Establish a special routine. Play a game or serve the same special meal each time your child returns. Kids thrive on routine—if they know exactly what to expect when they return to you it can help the transition.

Dealing with visitation refusal:

Sometimes kids refuse to leave one parent to be with the other. Although this can be a difficult situation, it is also common for children in joint custody.

- Find the cause. The problem may be one that is easy to resolve, like paying more attention to your child, making a change in discipline style, or having more toys or other entertainment. Or it may be that an emotional reason is at hand, such as conflict or misunderstanding. Talk to your child about his or her refusal.
- Go with the flow. Whether you have detected the reason for the refusal or not, try to give your child the space and time that he or she obviously needs. It may have nothing to do with you at all. And take heart: most cases of visitation refusal are temporary.
- Talk to your ex. A heart-to-heart with your ex about the refusal may be challenging and emotional, but can help you figure out what the problem is. Try to be sensitive and understanding to your ex as you discuss this touchy subject.

Here are the “10 Commandments” of divorce co-parenting, according to research and in-the-trenches parents.

1. Listen:

To yourself, to your children, to your ex. Sometimes put the ex-spouse first, “If it’s more important to the ex-spouse and it’s realistic – the best co-parenting is when sometimes, one spouse will defer to the other if it’s more important to them.”

2. Start slow:

If things are bumpy, begin communicating post-divorce via text and email rather than phone or face-to-face, says Karen Buscemi, author of *I Do Part Two: How to Survive Divorce, Co-Parent your Kids and Blend your Families without Losing your Mind*. “Limit what you say and how often you contact. Keep the other person in the loop of your kid’s life and keep it specific to that,” Buscemi says.

3. Accept your differences:

Even in happily married families, spouses' discipline, play and relate to their kids differently. It's no surprise, then, when divorced parents have different approaches, though it can make navigating those differences harder. You cannot control what occurs at your ex's house, but you can do your best to try to be on the same page regarding the big-ticket items like bedtime, homework, education and medical needs.

4. Respect each other as parents:

Divorce does not end a family, says Melinda Blau, author of *Parenting by Heart*. "Families can successfully cope with divorce and create a new environment in which children can develop 'normally.'" Never bad-mouth your ex, never send kids as messengers, and never burden your children with details of your breakup. It's not their responsibility. Your responsibility to them is to create a peaceful, loving environment (or two!) in which they can thrive and stave off the depression and relationship difficulties that can arise from an acrimonious divorce.

5. Anticipate and accept change:

When either or both of you remarry, and stepparents enter the picture, anticipate a barrage of feelings from the kids – and make them your focus. Don't let stepparents dole out punishments or lecture, says Buscemi. Rather, instill respect for the new adult in your child's life and establish that they will never replace the other parent, but instead be an additional person to care for and love your child and share their life.

6. Be consistent:

Whenever possible, establish similar rules, disciplinary techniques and schedules with your ex-spouse. Kids crave routine and, while you cannot mandate certain

details in your ex's house, you can at least initiate communication with him or her and work toward creating two harmonious homes for the kids' sake.

7. Seek smooth transitions:

Going back and forth can be hard for kids – make it as easy as possible. If your ex is late, don't berate him – save it for a private conversation if you need to discuss it. Talk through the coming changes in your child's schedule well in advance, so they can prepare themselves emotionally for change. When they return, especially if your child has a hard time with transitions, create a demilitarized zone of sorts – let her relax with a book or TV or just play in the yard until she feels ready to return to your routine.

8. Seek therapy – yes, together:

Even after you divorce, ex-spouses should seek out collaborative counseling if they can't get along enough to parent their children without strife. Don't burden the kids, Get your own help so you can be good for them.

9. Create a parenting plan:

Here on MetroParent.com, there are resources for ex-spouses to rely on to create effective co-parenting techniques. One involves creating a plan together during the divorce proceedings and writing things down so that you are, literally, on the same page. It's not a bad idea!

10. Parenting is a lifelong role:

So you didn't stay together “until death do us part.” You will with your kids! Everything you do and every behavior you model makes a lasting impression on your children and pre-determines how they will form their own relationships and succeeds in life. Take this role more seriously than any you'll ever hold. It is the most important. Your children should know, without a doubt, that they are more important than the conflicts in your failed marriage.

Therapeutic Techniques:

A client's comprehensive, multi-modal treatment plan may include one or more of the approaches discussed below.

Formulating a Comprehensive Multi-Modal Treatment Plan:

A mental health care provider may assess a client in many different ways, such as an interview, obtaining background information from medical records or school records (for which the client has signed a consent form), administering questionnaires, or by using other, more formal psychological test materials. Assessment may also include interviews with a spouse, significant other, or parent(s). Using that information, the provider then makes an initial diagnosis and creates a treatment plan that might include one or more of the following:

- individual therapy
- couples therapy
- family therapy
- parent guidance therapy
- biological intervention
- group therapy
- social support, networking, and self-help groups
- accommodations at school or work
- Specific Treatment Approaches

Your mental health care provider may use any one or a combination of the following psychotherapeutic interventions. Signing a written treatment plan is part of the process of entering treatment, and the treatment plan will contain reference to the treatment approaches described below.

1. Behavior therapy or behavior modification – treatment focusing on changing specific behavior through the use of positive or negative external consequences. Parent guidance therapy often includes a component of training in behavior modification, for parents to use to help their children decrease negative behaviors (temper tantrums) and increase positive behaviors (obedience to adult directions). Behavior therapy techniques can also be an important component of weight loss or weight management, as well as treatment of addictions. Behavior therapy is a well-documented and researched system of intervention that has been used clinically for over 55 years.

2. Biological intervention – psychiatric medications have been used effectively to treat many mental health disorders since the 1950s. Medications work directly with brain chemistry, to correct underlying imbalances that create depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and other symptoms. Other biological interventions with proven effectiveness in the treatment of mental health disorders include exercise, yoga, and massage therapy and relaxation techniques.

3. Cognitive therapy – a treatment approach first utilized in the late 1960s that focuses on helping people change their inner thoughts and views/interpretations of events. Cognitive therapy has been broadly and thoroughly researched, and is internationally accepted as an effective treatment, particularly for anxiety and depression. By changing one’s beliefs and internal self-talk, one can change problematic behaviors and reduce symptoms of distress.

4. Co-parenting therapy – a specialty area of couples therapy, in which separated or divorced parent’s meet together to build a calm, business-like relationship. Successful co-parenting therapy will enable parents to work together to raise their children effectively. Professionals have studied effective strategies for co-parenting therapy for the past 20 years.

5. Couples therapy – first developed in the 1950s, couples therapy enables two persons in an intimate relationship to build improved communication skills, learn to negotiate agreements and resolve conflicts, and work through issues of emotional hurt and forgiveness.

6. Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) – developed in the past 20 years and rigorously researched, DBT teaches a variety of skills to enable one to better regulate emotions and reduce symptoms of distress via a combination of Western psychological traditions and Eastern meditative techniques.

7. Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) – EMDR has developed over the past 25 years as a treatment method to resolve trauma-related disorders. The theoretical foundation of EMDR proposes that the brain, then dysfunctional stored in an isolated memory network inadequately processes overwhelming memories of distressing events. The goal of EMDR therapy is to more fully process the distressing memories and to reduce their maladaptive impact on the individual's emotions and behaviors. The International Society of Stress Studies has categorized EMDR as an evidence-based, level A treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder in adults.

8. Family therapy – first developed in the 1950s, family therapy involves meetings with an entire household or family in order to support development of better communication skills, to break out of harmful patterns of interaction between family members, and to build nurturing and health-promoting family relations in which all family members are respected. Aspects of authority, power and control in family functioning are often addressed during family therapy.

9. Group therapy – first developed in the 1960s, there are two main types of group therapy: process-oriented and skill building. Process-oriented group therapy

helps people build new social behaviors by focusing on the pattern of interactions between members of a therapy group.

10. Skill building group therapy - has an educational component, in which the group leader describes or demonstrates specific actions that group members can learn to reduce their symptoms of distress or change their behaviors in home and work settings.

11. Group therapy - has been shown to be particularly effective in recovery from addictions and anger management, and is increasingly recognized as an effective intervention for parent guidance counseling.

12. Play therapy – first developed in the 1940s, this therapeutic technique is used primarily with children under age 10. Toys, games and other nonverbal materials are used to help the child express and work through problematic emotions or traumatic events. Music therapy and art therapy are allied interventions and outgrowths of play therapy.

Spiritually integrated therapy –this technique supports the client in drawing on his/her unique spiritual beliefs to promote mental health and recovery. May include use of spiritual texts and/or prayer. May be used with all spiritual or religious traditions.

A successful divorce is one in which the parents divorce each other but do not require the child to divorce one of the parents, either as a result of parental conflict or by one parent not being available to the child.

The following quote nicely summarizes this knowledge:

The current research examining the effects of divorce on children concludes that a constructive divorce in a family with children requires minimizing the psychic injury to children through continued relationships with both parents and an atmosphere of support and cooperation between the parents.

Thus, it is a well-established fact that a child experiencing the dissolution of the family structure will do better if the parents are able to get along and reduce trauma in an already traumatic experience. Co-parenting can be a viable option when it is implemented by parents who want it to work because they understand that the child's needs supersede their own self interest, and it can be successful and rewarding for both the child and the parents.

IMPACT OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE ON CHILDREN:

There are many threatening and frightening things that happen to individuals whose relationship ends up in separation or divorce. When there are no children of the relationship, the adults can separate their lives relatively easily, albeit not without pain. For a child, however, the termination of a nuclear family is, most often, highly traumatizing.

Children, who go through separation, and/or divorce, experience abandonment. Generally, this is also their primary fear. Younger children do not have the intellectual resources, or older children the emotional resources to understand this as anything other than, "I am being left by my parent!" When asked, "What do you worry about most?" They often respond with, "I am afraid I will never see one of my parents again." When children of separation or divorce are asked, "What are your three wishes?" most will usually say something like, "I wish my Mom and Dad were back together." It's never easy for the children, they suffer the most of all when it comes to the breakup of their parents.

A central reason that divorce is so difficult for children is the fact that they have little life experience to understand why their parents would separate and what happens when a parent, or when both parents, leaves the family home. They frequently worry, "If one of my parents mysteriously left home today, who is to say that my other parent won't leave home tomorrow, and there will be nobody left to take care of me?"

Often, children are afraid to ask what will happen. They are afraid they may hear that their worst fear has come true - that their parents have indeed, permanently abandoned by their parents. And, if the parents do not explain what the separation means and doesn't mean for the child, then the child may remain in a state of chronic anxiety.

Sometimes, this anxiety gets expressed as acting-out with aggressive and non-compliant behavior, and sometimes it gets expressed as withdrawn behavior, eating problems, sleeping problems, and/or school problems. So, if a child's behavior has changed from a usual pattern, it may simply be a red flag being waved saying, "I'm having difficulty dealing with this situation.

Can you please help me by explaining what is going on?"

Your child needs you to take time to explain in detail what the separation will mean to him or her. This is an excellent time to reassure your children that the separation and divorce are not their fault. It is not something they said, did, felt, or thought that made Daddy or Mommy leave. Give the child a simple explanation of why the separation did take place. Present it in a way that does not put down the other parent.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS:

In dealing with a former partner in the joint task of raising children after separation and/or divorce, it is very important, and clearly very challenging to separate the parenting issues from leftover partnering issues.

So how do former partners jointly parent their children? And what is co-parenting? Let us begin by defining some terms and concepts.

LEGAL CUSTODY:

Legal custody is a designation of parental authority to make major decisions regarding the health, education, and welfare of the child. Some examples of such issues that need decisions would be as follows: Does the child need braces? What school will the child attend? What religion will the child practice? The typical options for Legal Custody are either Sole legal custody, or Joint legal custody.

A parent with Sole legal custody has authority to make all major decisions about the child. Parents with Joint legal custody share the authority to make major decisions about their child.

PHYSICAL CUSTODY:

Physical custody designates the amount of time a child shares with each parent. The typical options are Sole physical custody or Joint physical custody. A parent with Sole physical custody has responsibility for the child the significant majority of the time. Parents with Joint physical custody share responsibility for the child's time within a more equitable schedule. It is important to note that neither Joint physical or joint legal custody necessarily means an exactly equal time-sharing arrangement.

The legal definitions of these terms have purposely been left general and broad by the legislatures, so that any specific application could take into account the particular needs of a given child and his or her family situation. Any and all time-

sharing plans should be based on the very broad standard of “the best interests of the child.” It should take into consideration the child’s developmental needs.

VISITATION:

Another term to define is visitation. This is generally considered to be the time that the child shares with the non-custodial parent. Notice these highlighted terms -custody, visitation. They sound like the child is a piece of property, or a prisoner.

Rather than viewing the separated family arrangements in traditional legal terms, it is more valid, psychologically speaking, for physical custody to be conceptualized from the point of view of the child. We know that, with rare exceptions, it is in the child’s best interest to have regular and continuing contact with both parents. And, with very young children (under the age of 4 or 5), it is important if at all possible to have frequent contact with each parent. This is because of their very limited memory, which after only several days fades the image of the missing parent. This all is to say the child’s rights have to supersede the parent’s rights. It is the child’s right to have access to both parents. It is the parent’s obligation and responsibility to be available and to care for the child.

PARENTING PLAN:

Less competitive or “fighting words” and more collaborative terminology would be helpful in lowering the stress of an already difficult situation. For example, rather than using the term’s “custody” and “visitation,” I suggest using the more emotionally neutral term, “parenting plan.” This term contains the more normalized concepts of a child sharing time with or living with each parent at different times. In a written parenting plan, sentences begin with, “The child will share time with (or, live with) each parent according to the following schedule:” rather than, “The Father has visitation on alternate weekends.” Even if the child sees one parent only once a year for a few days, the child is still sharing time and living with that parent during that time period.

The time sharing plan should take into consideration what that child has become accustomed to, regarding the parenting style and arrangement during the time of the intact relationship.

This is critical for the adjustment and stability of the child during the often chaotic and stressful period following the break up. If, during the relationship, there had been a primary parent carrying out the major responsibility in time and effort, then such should remain the initial basis of a parenting plan.

It need not remain as such forever, but it should begin with the status quo from the child's view, and be modified gradually over time. It is important to understand that no agreement is written in stone. All parenting plans are negotiable, as various needs arise that necessitate modification of the plan.

If a child is to be with one parent significantly more of the time than with the other parent (for example, when the two parents live a considerable distance from one another), I suggest replacing the traditional term of "custodial parent" with the less emotionally charged concept of "the child's primary residence" and "the child's secondary residence." Of course, if the child shares time fairly equitably between the parents, then there is no need to designate either parent's residence with such title.

CO-PARENTING:

Technically, co-parenting exists with any parenting arrangement, regardless of its formal designation. In whatever way each parent is involved in raising the child, the parents co-parent. Most effective co-parenting arrangements contain the following characteristic dynamics between the parents: cooperation, communication, compromise, and consistency. These dynamics often grow over time and typically take a period of years to evolve effectively.

PARALLEL PARENTING:

While parents in a working, functional, parental relationship can only carry out meaningful co-parenting, parallel parenting is more characteristic of parents in a dysfunctional relationship dynamic. Parallel parenting manifests when there is an insufficient degree of cooperation, communication, compromise, or consistency to carry out co-parenting.

Frequently, in the beginning stages of a separation or divorce, parallel parenting may exist as a result of the lack of trust and sense of betrayal. While most parents are able to work through these dynamics to establish a more cooperative relationship, some parents are not and they remain in a power struggle that affects all negotiations between them. Certainly, when post-divorce parenting arrangements are Court-ordered in an adversarial court battle, such on-going patterns are common.

Children in parallel parenting arrangements often experience heightened anxiety during phone calls from the other parent and during transfers between parents. This anxiety results from the child's awareness of the great potential for parental fights to ensue at these times. It is important to protect the children from this potential for parental conflict to erupt. Minimizing verbal and physical contact between the parents can help. It is often useful to utilize written communication (letters, faxes, e-mail, etc.), or a third party, for communication purposes.

FIVE CATEGORIES OF POST-DIVORCE SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIPS:

Conceptualized five categories of post-divorce spousal relationships: Perfect Pals, Cooperative Colleagues, Angry Associates, Fiery Foes, and Dissolved Duos. The first two are appropriately referred to as functional co-parenting. The next two are dysfunctional relationships that can manage "parallel parenting" at best. And, the

last category, Dissolved Duos, sadly for the children, consists of 100% solo parenting.

PERFECT PALS:

Perfect Pals are best friends who were married and have made a mutual decision to go their separate ways. These parents like one another. They usually do all their own legal work and establish a parenting plan that is in the “best interests of the child.” They are flexible and have respect for each other, both as co-parents and as friends. These are the individuals who will be able to celebrate holidays together. Even after remarriage to others, they may, for example, all celebrate Thanksgiving dinner together. When graduation comes, they might purchase one present together for their child and sit together at the ceremony.

COOPERATIVE COLLEAGUES:

While still within the co-parenting category, Cooperative Colleagues have a difficult time when they separate. They most likely have attorneys or require a third party to assist in finalizing plans of the marital settlement. Most often these people did not make a mutual decision to separate. They still do not necessarily like each other, but they respect one another as parents. They can separate their parenting from their partnering issues. They support the child’s involvement in each other’s lives and in the lives of the extended families. They are generally courteous to each other. A few times a year, they may have a disagreement that initially will require third party intervention, but they are able to resolve such disputes outside of Court.

Eventually, cooperative colleagues figure out how to avoid getting caught up in the drama of the former partner. At graduation, for example, they may or may not sit together. Either way, they are cordial and not overtly hostile. They will likely feel more comfortable purchasing separate gifts for their child and one might take the graduate to dinner while the other takes him or her to breakfast. These people

have let go of each other. They permit and support the child having a relationship with the other parent. As years move on, each is less threatened by the other. The child has two houses and two families under one large conceptual family umbrella.

Now, we move into the more dysfunctional post-divorce relationship categories. Although many still refer to this as co-parenting, I suggest the use of the more apt term, “parallel parenting,” to describe these dynamics.

ANGRY ASSOCIATES:

Angry Associates do not know how to emotionally disengage from each other. They are “compatible combatants.” They fight well together and thus remain in a destructive relationship from which at least one of the parties was truly attempting to leave. At least one of the partners gets stuck in the emotional process of divorce and cannot move on with life. This can go on for years or, perhaps, a lifetime. These parents are in a persistent and continual power struggle with one another.

They regularly require third party intervention (mediators, lawyers, arbitrators, and judges). They do not respect each other as parents, nor as people. Their child becomes a pawn in this unrelenting conflict and his or her childhood is sacrificed to the immaturity of the parents. These are the parents who do not encourage the child to share time with the other parent. Involvement with extended family members is not often a real possibility for the child.

Certainly, if looks could cause harm, injury would happen, (and occasionally does) between these parents. They will definitely choose not to sit near one another at any of their child’s events. More than likely, the parent responsible for the child on graduation day will not encourage the child to acknowledge the other parent, in any way. These parents do not understand that, although they have separated or divorced, the child does not choose to divorce either parent.

Unfortunately, these parents see things in black and white, win/lose, and either/or.

There is no gray, no win-win in their consciousness. This child will grow up walking on eggshells and scanning the environment to figure out the “right” thing to say and do. The child’s base of operation is one of living in a “war zone.” This child cannot be the loving center of his/her parents’ world. This child exists as the “spoils of war.”

FIERY FOES:

The next relationship category, called the Fiery Foes, is one in which the dynamics of the dysfunctional relationship further exacerbate the intensity of the dissolution process. These parents have such disdain for one another that, for example, one of the parents cannot even attend the child’s graduation.

Not only does each parent dislike the other, but the child and the eventual grandchild will have to carry the anger down through the generations as to how awful the other parent was as a parent, partner, and yes, human being.

The therapist of this child can do nothing more than comfort the child during the therapy sessions. For, after these sessions, the child must return to the family war.

The children of these parents suffer psychopathology of the worst order, distress that will assure them of the need for life-long psychotherapy. Often the risks (both physical and emotional) to the child of on-going efforts by their parents at co-parenting are too great. Decisive and sometimes dramatic Court intervention is a virtual necessity with Fiery Foes.

DISSOLVED DUOS:

The final category is Dissolved Duos. These parents have reached such an extreme point of pain that one of the parents drops out of the child's life entirely. The parent typically moves out of state and begins a new family, often never even telling the new spouse that there had ever been another family. This parent would not have even known that their child had graduated. Becoming the departing of the Dissolved Duo is one way to disengage from the emotional pain of divorce, but the price that the child pays in being abandoned is huge.

THE IMPACT OF GRIEF ON SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING:

Most parents want to co-parent successfully and strive to conduct themselves in ways that would include them in the first two post-divorce relationship categories. What gets in the way?

THE GRIEVING PROCESS:

Just as with death, when a relationship ends there is a grieving process. This natural response to loss often contributes significantly to difficulties in co-parenting. It takes no less than two years to bring the grieving process regarding the break up of the relationship to a resolution.

This timeline is founded on the notion that a person needs to live through the first year after the break up with all its holidays and occasions, as he or she moves away from the established patterns of the marital relationship. The second year permits the creation of new patterns. It should not be assumed that a new relationship couldn't be established during the grieving period.

It is just that unresolved issues from the prior relationship often interfere with the new relationship. Ghosts of the previous relationship frequently intrude, unconsciously, into the dynamics of a new relationship and often contribute to its problems. Frequently, the grief process takes much longer than two years. One

theory suggests that the grieving process can take as long as one-third to one-half the length of the relationship that just ended.

The grieving process has many theoretical models. One stage-theory that is very useful was developed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. The first stage is the stage of denial - the disbelief that this is actually happening. The second stage is the stage of anger. This can take many forms, which include conflict, rage, acting out and redefining the former partner in as negative a light as possible. Johnston has termed this tendency the "negative reconstruction of the spousal identity."

In this phenomenon, all the attributes that initially attracted one to the former partner are now attributes that are repulsive. It is a way for a spouse to emotionally disengage. As examples: "He is such a good provider," becomes "He is such a workaholic." "She is such a free spirit," becomes "She is such a flake." "He is so well informed," becomes, "He is so opinionated." Sound familiar?

The third stage, of grieving, involves remorse or bargaining. In this stage, one is frightened about really losing the other. Promises and deals are made that positive changes will happen if only they can get back together.

The fourth stage is the phase of depression. There is deep pain and sadness about the loss of the dreams, fantasies, expectations, and hopes.

Finally the last stage, acceptance, is one which involves moving on in life. It has been our experience that you know you have reached the acceptance stage when someone, inquiring about your relationship, asks, "What happened?" And, your response, given in less than ten seconds and void of emotional charge, is "We just went our separate ways."

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS:

It is often the case that one parent is at a more functional level than is the other with regard to co-parenting. If this is the situation, then it is more effective for the parent who is at the more functional level to remain rational and empathic toward the other parent.

If the more functional parent is drawn to a lower level of functionality, there will be more chaos and disruption, not only for that parent, but, more importantly, for the child.

The higher functioning parent would be better off learning effective negotiating skills for dealing with an individual who prefers to be in a competitive rather than collaborative negotiating arena. Do not expect the separation or divorce to magically change the pattern of the other party from how it was during the marriage to being more effective in resolving problems.

Without active new learning, it is unusual for such patterns to change on its own. Individual counseling and classes in communication skills are productive resources for the higher functioning parent.

IMPACT ON THE INDIVIDUAL'S ABILITY TO "MOVE ON"

There is yet another concept to address that impacts the ability to co-parent. The emotional process of divorce for one partner is not generally on the same timeline as it is for the other partner. Typically, one of the partners becomes aware of being unhappy in the relationship.

That individual may request the other to attend marital counseling in hopes of getting the other partner to change and make the relationship "right." The other partner may respond with something like, "I don't have a problem. You have a problem. You go to counseling. I am very happy just the way things are."

The person attempting to seek professional help is already well into the process of emotional detachment. The less effort exerted by the other partner, the more such detachment occurs. The interesting aspect here is that the first party experiences interactions with the spouse as a constant, daily reality check regarding the unhappy experience.

This validates the perception that the relationship is no longer functional. Typically, this internal process of detachment goes on for about a year or two before the decision to separate is made.

Once the decision is made to leave the relationship, there typically is little or no chance of reclaiming the relationship. And, on the day that the first partner announces that the relationship is over, the grieving process for the second party begins. It is this timeline disparity that creates turmoil between the couple.

At that point, the person who is being left says, "Okay, let's go to counseling and fix this!" Frequently, the intent of such a request is to have the counselor tell the leaving party that he or she is in error and should stay and work it out. When this does not happen as hoped, the partner who is left begins the emotional process of divorce.

Once separated, the grieving process of the person who was left is somewhat different and more difficult than that of the one who left. Now, the only base of perception is the memory of the relationship, not the reality of the day-to-day experience. And, those memories can rapidly become grossly distorted. Once again, individual counseling for the person being left can be of tremendous help in providing support, and can be a reality check for clearer thinking and more appropriate planning.

ESTABLISHING A PARENTING PLAN:

For co-parenting to be effective, both parents need to consider the needs of the child above their own needs. A written parenting plan provides the structure necessary to get through a difficult time. It is like a map that gives directions on how the two of you agree to parent your child.

This structured agreement offers the basis of security upon which the former spouses can build trust. A parenting plan should be built on a foundation of the developmental needs of the child. It is often useful to seek sound professional advice about the needs of children at different ages in devising a parenting plan.

It should be understood that what is appropriate for a child at a certain age will not necessarily be appropriate for the same child at a later age. The child's temperament and response to changes should be addressed and monitored. For example, how adaptable is your child? How easily can he or she handle changes? How sensitive to stimuli is he? How much does she need a highly structured routine? How distractible is he?

Also the child's sense of time is an important factor in considering the duration a child can cope with separation from a parent. For example, young children (under five years of age or so) have only about a three-day memory for an absent parent. After about three days with no contact with the other parent (including no phone contact), these children may begin to show distress, because they have begun to "forget" the other parent, and thus they may feel abandoned.

As children get older, they can handle increased time away from each parent. These facts, of course, mean that an agreement cannot be permanent but rather is always only temporary, good and useful only until the child and/or the circumstances change. A parenting plan should include a regular school year

schedule, a summer schedule, and a holiday schedule. Consistency, especially in the initial phases of the arrangement is important.

Once an agreement is reached the less there is to negotiate and the more that trust can be established between the parents. This is beneficial, since ultimately, it will likely nurture more flexibility between the parties.

The day-to-day parenting plan should take into consideration the reality of the child. For example, if the child is young, and/or has awareness that one of the parents has been the primary source of parenting, then such would be the starting point of the negotiated agreement. Gradual shifts from what is familiar to the child to what is possible are best for children.

To alter this too suddenly would be more about meeting the needs of the adults than of the child. The child is then forced to sacrifice his or her needs, rather than the parents more appropriately making sacrifices for their child.

Responsibilities can be negotiated (for example, who will take the child to medical appointments, purchase clothing, etc.). Such responsibilities can be shared or specifically assigned to one parent, but it should be acknowledged in the agreement. If the parents have a comfortable level of communication, the flexibility to modify the agreement can be accomplished through mutual consent.

If there is difficulty communicating, then it is more effective to keep the agreement structured, with little modification. Of course, it is helpful to specify how minor modifications can be made when a legitimate need arises (e.g., when one parent is tied up in traffic and does not make it on time to a scheduled transfer of the child; or, for example, when a child is very sick and transfer to the other parent is medically inadvisable).

It is also useful to set out specific guidelines for communication. These may include when, for how long and how frequently the parents agree to talk business with one another regarding financial matters, legal matters, etc. Also, specified time should be set aside to discuss the children.

It is critically important that these discussions NOT take place in earshot of the children. Such negotiations can frequently lead to conflict and even minor conflict in front of the children of separation and divorce can be distressing to the children.

Co-parenting can work more smoothly if there is a color-coded calendar at each home. Each parent is represented by a particular color. In this way, even young children who cannot yet recognize letters can still associate one color with Mommy, and a different color with Daddy. Consistency of the color assignment across households facilitates comfort in recognition for a young child.

Anchoring certain concepts to specific events is also useful for a young child. For example, you can say, “You will be seeing Mommy (or Daddy) after you go to sleep three times,” then “two times,” then “one time.” A young child does not really understand what a “Tuesday” is, nor what “next weekend” means.

Young children are concrete thinkers. It helps a child to adjust if there is a picture of the other parent in the room where the child sleeps. That way, the memory of the other parent can be sustained in the child’s mind for a longer time between transfers.

Open phone access of the child with each parent is helpful, as long as neither parent is stressing the child. The call should be a special event and solely for the purpose of speaking with the children. It is most useful to not request to speak to the other parent when you call to speak to the child.

The child experiences arguments that can ensue when you ask to speak to the other parent as “my parents are arguing over me.” Of course, it is most helpful to teach the child how to call the other parent, without the need of parental assistance. Speed dial buttons on phones are perfect for young children doing this.

Similarly, during transfers of the child, be civil and brief, saying, “Hello,” “Thank you,” “Good bye.” Again, it is best to avoid discussing adult matters (money, schedules, lawyers, etc.) during transfer of the child.

If it is economically feasible, the child should have sufficient clothing and toys at both houses. This avoids the child feeling like a traveler carrying luggage. If possible, arrange to transfer the child at school or at childcare. One parent drops off; the other picks up. This tends to reduce the child’s separation anxiety that results from leaving one parent to go directly with the other.

Being a co-parent requires a great deal of skill. This includes the ability to listen and to avoid getting defensive. The ability to let your former partner parent the child his or her own way is a skill.

It need not be perfect, or as good as your parenting style, but it just has to be good enough.

It helps to understand that the child can benefit from what each of you has to offer. It is a skill to present a concern and let the other parent deal with it as he or she sees best.

It is helpful for both parents to comprehend that they are in a joint business enterprise. Their business is to raise their child and provide the necessary skills for this child to grow into a productive member of society.

That does not require you to like each other or to want to spend time together. It just requires an understanding that, for the sake of the child, you let go of the animosity and resentment towards each other, and let your child love each of you.

EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP:

There are four stages in the evolution of a relationship from a beginning romance and/or marriage towards a divorce and co-parenting relationship. The first is the stage of “intimacy.” This is when you get together, are in love, and the world looks fine.

The second stage may best be termed “negative intensity.” This is when the relationship is falling apart and separation and divorce are in the works.

The third is the stage of “building a structured agreement” for how to continue raising the children in the context of separation or divorce. In this stage, the parents must form a business-like relationship and clarify the time-scheduling plan for the children and the rules of conduct for how the parents agree to conduct themselves after separation and divorce.

The last is the stage of “emotional disengagement.” It is in this stage that you reassess and establish a post-divorce relationship with each other, which can range from Perfect Pals to Dissolved Duos. Hopefully you will end up, minimally, as Cooperative Colleagues, being courteous and civil in your interactions with one another. Unfortunately, many divorcing parents try to move directly from stage two to stage four without going through stage three.

Bypassing stage three (building a structured agreement) does not allow for the necessary tasks of structuring a co-parenting agreement that prevents the children from being used as pawns between the parents as they continue to act on their negative feelings towards one another.

This, unfairly, puts further stress on the child, and it should be avoided.

Divorce and separation do not automatically result in the parents realizing that now they must work together differently from how they did when they were together. Do not expect miracles. Your former partner is not going to wake up all of a sudden and say, “Oh gee, now I understand what s/he wanted. I will act appropriately.” A parenting plan is a map. It is a map of how the two parents will continue to raise their child.

However, just as a road map does not teach you how to drive the car safely on the road, but merely shows you the territory, the parenting map simply describes in detail the territory of co-parenting. You are solely responsible for your own behavior in following this map. The more communication and parenting skills you pick up along the way, the safer the journey will be for your children.

Developing understanding and empathy for the other parent are essential in using the map effectively. You can still have accidents, despite the map that you create. Individual counseling or some other guided experience in self-awareness can be a benefit to you in relating to your former partner.

Often times, individual counseling is very effective in figuring out your own boundaries. If both individuals are willing, divorce counseling aimed at learning communication skills can be very helpful for untangling the old emotional hooks and learning effective ways to co-parent, for your child’s sake.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE:

Imagine that you are attending your child’s twenty-fifth birthday, or wedding. Will your child be able to look at the two of you on this day of celebration and say the following? “I would like to honor my Mom and Dad for their love of me. They were able to navigate through a difficult situation and protect me from the

storm. I love you both for showing me how to be a human being.” Or, will your child look out and not see one or either of you there, because of your unresolved anger towards each other?

A child has the right to love both parents. All children are a gift from God. A child is a blessing and was made out of love.

Any child that has to go through their parents splitting up is never easy and it is truly not fair to that child that is in the middle of this. Counseling is recommended for the child to understand that it is not the child’s fault why their parent are splitting up and to open up and talk about their feeling.

As children and adolescents grow, they are constantly in the process of developing the social skills and emotional intelligence necessary to lead healthy, happy lives. When children experience emotions or engage in behaviors that interfere with their happiness and ability to thrive, they may benefit from meeting with a mental health professional such as a therapist or counselor.

Parents and children often attend therapy sessions together, as therapy can be a safe space in which to address the thoughts, feelings, and emotions experienced by all members.

Developmental Stages from Birth to Adolescence:

As they grow, children will experience changes in their moods and behaviors. Some of these changes are relatively predictable and, though they may be challenging, most are completely normal aspects of child development. In general, as long as children are behaving in ways that are consistent with their age range, the challenges they experience should not create cause for concern.

There are many theories addressing the developmental phases that children go through, and recognizing these phases can be invaluable to parents and caregivers

in understanding child behavior and developmental needs. Erik Erikson's theory outlining the stages of psychosocial development from birth to adulthood is one of the most widely recognized stage-based theories. Erikson, an influential developmental psychologist, identified eight stages in life, five of which take place in childhood and adolescence:

Infancy: Trust vs. Mistrust:

In the first stage of human development, infants explore the world and learn whether their environment is a safe, predictable place. Infants require a significant amount of attention and comforting from their parents, and it is from the parents that they develop their first sense of trust or mistrust.

Early Childhood: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt:

In the second stage of psychosocial development, children begin to assert independence, develop preferences, and make choices. Defiance, temper tantrums, and stubbornness are common. It is in this stage that a person first begins developing interests, a sense of autonomy, and shame or doubt.

Preschool Years: Initiative vs. Guilt:

In this stage, children learn about social roles and emotions. They become active and curious. Imaginary play is a crucial part of this stage. Defiance, temper tantrums, and stubbornness remain common. As they develop, children will begin exhibiting behaviors of their own volition. The way parents and caregivers react will encourage a child's initiative to act independently or cause the child to develop a sense of guilt about inappropriate actions.

School Age: Industry (Competence) vs. Inferiority:

Relationships with peers and academic performance become increasingly important in this stage. Children begin to display a wider and more complex range of emotions. This is a time when problems or disappointment in academic and

social settings may lead to mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety. As academic and social tasks become more demanding, conditions such as attention-deficit hyperactivity and oppositional behavior may interfere.

Adolescence: Identity vs. Role Confusion:

Adolescents become more independent and begin to form identities based on experimentation with new behaviors and roles. Puberty usually occurs during this stage, bringing with it a host of physical and emotional changes. Changes during these often volatile adolescent years may strain parent-adolescent relationships, especially when new behaviors go beyond experimentation and cause problems at school or home, or if emotional highs and lows persist and lead to experiences such as anxiety or depression.

Triggers and Risk Factors

Each developmental phase presents specific challenges for children that they tend to work through as normal parts of growing up. Mental health problems can exacerbate these challenges, though, and in many cases, mental health issues arise as a direct result of events in a child's life, whether those events are traumatic experiences such as being bullied or ordinary experiences such as moving to a new home.

Every child will respond differently to changes in life, but some of the events that may impact a child's mental health include:

- Parental divorce or separation.
- The birth of a sibling.
- The death of a loved one, such as a family member or a pet.
- Find a Therapist
- Physical or sexual abuse.
- Poverty or homelessness.

- Natural disaster.
- Domestic violence.
- Moving to a new place or attending a new school.
- Being physically or emotionally bullied.
- Taking on more responsibility than is age-appropriate.

A child's age, gender, and other factors will influence his or her resilience to changes and challenges in life. Younger children and boys, for example, often have an easier time adjusting to divorce than do girls or older children. Genetics play a role, too, as some mental health issues, such as bipolar, tend to run in families.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Issues:

According to the National Institute on Mental Illness (NAMI) about 4 million children and adolescents experience a mental health issue that significantly impairs them at home, school, or in their social groups. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates prevalence rates for the following diagnosable mental health conditions among children ages 3 to 17:

Attention-deficit hyperactivity (ADHD): 6.8%

Behavioral conditions: 3.5%

Anxiety: 3%

Depression: 2%

Autism: 1.1%

Tourette syndrome: 0.2%

These mental health conditions represent a portion of those experienced by children and adolescents, but they are certainly not inclusive of all conditions experienced.

Child abuse and neglect are also prevalent concerns among the various stressful life events that can lead to mental health challenges. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recorded 686,000 cases of child maltreatment in the year 2012 alone. Children who are abused or neglected may be unable to share what they have experienced due to overwhelming fear or shame. However, most professionals who work with children—including therapists—are mandated by law to report child maltreatment to appropriate authorities, regardless of any agreements about confidentiality.

When children reach adolescence, relationships, romantic or otherwise, can be a point of significant strife. Relationships between parents and children are crucial to healthy development, but may become strained by the many ups and downs of adolescent life. For example, most teenagers worry about romantic relationships. However, for some teenagers, worrying about relationships may excessively drain their energy and make it difficult to enjoy life.

Disordered eating, a condition that, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, affects about 10% of young women in the United States, may be attributed in part to the social pressures and stress of adolescent life. Two common forms of this condition, anorexia nervosa and bulimia, are more common in the female population but also occur in the adolescent male population. Disordered eating also frequently co-occurs with substance abuse.

School counselor or pediatrician who can refer you to someone with specialized training and experience in working with youth. Treatment, whether it's medication or therapy or a combination of both, works for many adolescents experiencing mental health issues, but it must be accessed in order to work.

In late 2009, a study partially funded by the National Institute on Mental Health found that only about half of all children and adolescents experiencing generalized anxiety, panic, disordered eating, depression, attention-deficit hyperactivity (ADHD), and conduct issues actually received professional mental health services. The study also found that while prevalence rates were roughly the same across races, fewer African-Americans and Mexican-Americans were likely to seek help, which indicates gaps in access and/or barriers to treatment among minority adolescents.

Substance Use in Adolescents

Experimentation with alcohol and drugs is fairly common among adolescents and can lead to serious developmental, social, and behavioral issues. The CDC has estimated the following prevalence rates for problems associated with substance use among adolescent's ages 12 to 17:

Problematic illegal drug use: 4.7%

Problematic alcohol use: 4.2%

Physical dependence on cigarettes: 2.8%

Many programs exist for adolescents that experience problems associated with use of drugs or alcohol. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recommends that supportive caregivers be involved in treatment for adolescent substance use. Supportive caregivers can play an important part in treatment by monitoring the adolescent's use of substances, holding them accountable to therapy goals, and by helping find new and healthy ways to cope with the stress or conditions that may have led to substance use. SAMHSA also recommends that treatments address other mental health conditions that may co-occur in the adolescent receiving care. In some cases, residential treatment programs may prove beneficial. Residential treatment provides a safe, supportive environment and medical supervision, promotes

camaraderie among residents, and removes residents from their daily lives where triggers may compel them to continue using substances.

Other examples of treatments for adolescent substance abuse may include:

Teen Intervene: This is a fairly brief intervention for teens that show early signs of problems with drugs or alcohol. The treatment helps adolescents set goals and recognize their own values that may help them avoid using drugs and/or alcohol. The treatment also helps adolescents identify healthy coping strategies for dealing with stress without the use of substances.

Adolescent Community Reinforcement: This treatment approach addresses substance use by identifying factors from the adolescent's life and family that may have led to substance use. The treatment then helps the family develop a support system for the adolescent trying to move away from substance abuse.

Multisystemic therapy (MST) is an intensive, family-focused and community-based treatment program for chronically violent youth.

Multisystemic Family Therapy: This is a highly individualized treatment that works to address problems that may occur at school, home, or in friendship circles. A combination of therapeutic approaches, including behavioral, cognitive behavioral, and family therapies are used to help families address substance use and other mental health conditions that occur for the adolescent in treatment.

Therapy and Counseling for Youth

Many types of therapy emphasize talking and thinking about feelings and experiences, which can be particularly challenging for young children. In working with children, counselors often use therapies that allow children to express themselves non-verbally, such as play therapy, sand tray therapy, and art therapy. In some cases, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR),

which relies very little on verbalization of experiences, can be appropriate for work with youth.

Youth of any age may feel uncomfortable, afraid, or ashamed about communicating what they are experiencing to an adult they do not know. If you are a parent or caregiver, these tips can help when talking to children about therapy and mental health treatment:

Find a good time to talk and assure them that they are not in trouble.

- Listen actively.
- Take your child's concerns, experiences, and emotions seriously.
- Try to be open, authentic, and relaxed.
- Talk about how common the issues they are experiencing may be.
- Explain that the role of a therapist is to provide help and support.

Explain that a confidentiality agreement can be negotiated so children—especially adolescents—have a safe space to share details privately, while acknowledging that you will be alerted if there are any threats to their safety.

When searching for a therapist or counselor, it may help to seek advice from a school counselor or pediatrician who can refer you to someone with specialized training and experience in working with youth. Some therapists specialize in family therapy, in which multiple family members may attend sessions together, as well as independently, if necessary. There are also treatments designed to address parenting skills, such as parent-child interaction therapy. These treatments may be useful when a child's behavior becomes difficult to manage.

Medication and Therapy for Children and Adolescents:

Many prominent bodies of research highlight the efficacy of a combined treatment approach, or the use of both medication and therapy, when a physician or psychiatrist for a mental health issue prescribes medication.

In fact, the American Psychological Association's Practice Guidelines Regarding Psychologists' Involvement in Pharmacological Issues encourages, whenever possible, to include psychotherapy when medication is prescribed.

Many mental health professionals argue that medication is over prescribed as a "quick fix," while therapy, which may teach a person long-term coping strategies and self-management, is not encouraged enough. If your child is prescribed an antidepressant, antipsychotic, anxiolytic, stimulant, or other psychotropic drugs, consider finding a therapist or counselor to pair with the drug treatment.

20 Questions needed to be asked

- What are the most important things that a child needs to grow up healthy and happy? (*Ex. a strong family, unconditional love, discipline, proper nutrition.*)
- What are the most important qualities or characteristics that you desire to see from your child? (*Ex. well educated, athletic, respectful, creative, confident, empathetic etc.*)
- What parenting methods did your parents use that are really important to you... what parenting tactics or family rules/rituals do you want to use with your own children? (*Ex. Family dinners, movie night, family activities, no yelling, high academic expectations, good manners, respect for adult's etc.*)
- What parenting methods did your parents use that you found hurtful or ineffective... what parenting tactics or family rules/rituals do you want to avoid with your own children? (*Ex. No curfew, too much adult alcohol consumption, unpredictable environment, too much sarcasm, emotionally cold, too quick to spank, lack of parental attention, too high/low of expectations etc.*)

- How were emotions expressed in your family while you were growing up? What were the unwritten rules surrounding expressing a feeling and/or a need? (*Ex. were children allowed to cry, could children ask clarifying questions, did you hug hello, was there lots of laughter etc.*)
- What are your greatest parenting skills... what are you already good at? (*Ex. playing with the child, setting clear boundaries, always meeting the child's eating and diaper changing needs, ability to understand my child's non-verbal language, ability to provide a safe and predictable environment.*)
- What are your partner's greatest parenting skills... what is he/she already good at?
- What do you struggle with in relation to parenting? Which of your parenting skills could use some improvement? (*Ex. structure, consistency, loving attention, being playful, being open-minded.*)
- If I were to ask you to comment about your partner's parenting troubles, what behaviors do you sometimes use that have created unsuccessful interactions in the past? (*I use overgeneralizations, I can be passive aggressive, while they are talking I am thinking up my response/retort, I can be unclear or unspecific, I can bully people with my tone and/or body language, I don't pay attention etc.*)
- In relation to communication I have a tendency to either (pick one or more): prove I'm right, counter critique, be ambiguous, say one thing when I feel another, act contemptuous, over-generalize, get defensive, get aggressive, use tangents and distractions or withdraw.

- What are the environmental factors which are creating the most difficulty for you in relation to raising a child? (*Ex. no extended family support, financial hardship, proximity of support, over-involvement of a friend or family member, difficult weather, partner's work hours, your work hours, lack of adult activities, poor daycare or school systems etc.*)
- How will you and your spouse know if you are exhausted, overly stressed and in need of a some recovery time? (*Ex. headaches, stomach pain, ruminating thoughts, increased emotional reactivity, increased withdrawing behaviors, increases abrasiveness, excessive TV watching etc.*)
- What helps most when you are feeling burnt out? (*Ex. exercise, sleep, time with friends or family, a date night, a movie, gardening, time alone, meditation, visiting a religious establishment etc.*)
- How are you at asking for support? How are you at receiving support? How are you at receiving unsolicited support?
- What can your partner do to support you when you are feeling overwhelmed, overworked and or overly stressed? (*watch the kids, take the kids to a family members house, create an activity for the kids, do important household tasks, give loving attention, be emotionally available, empathetically listen, cuddle, make the space for individual time, etc.*)
- Is your current situation manageable for you as an individual? What do you need to maintain a satisfactory level of mental, emotional, and physical wellness? (*Ex. less time at work, more childcare, more adult activities, more help with housework, help with finances, more physical or emotional intimacy*)

from my partner, to feel safe, to feel noticed and important, to feel in control, more time to rest, time to exercise, time to engage in a hobby etc.)

- What are your partner's greatest strengths in relation to meeting your needs in your adult relationship? (*Ex. good listener, romantic, does thoughtful things for me, knows me very well, healthy sexuality, good provider, accepting of who I am etc.*)

- What did you partner do in the past or what could your partner learn to do that would really help your relationship with him/her? (*Ex. better listener, more random acts of kindness, more understanding, more open-minded, more romance, showing me that I am important etc.*)

- What would you like to see from your co-parenting dynamic that will enable you both to co-parent more effectively? (*Ex. structure, more open-mindedness, more acceptance of our differences, more time at home, less alcohol intake, less time in front of the TV, more healthy choices, to not spoil the children with candy and toys etc.*)

- In order for there to be more collaboration and synergy between you and your partner what changes do you need to make? (*Ex. I need to deal with my own childhood issues, I need help with my anger, I need to be less stubborn, I need to express what I really feel, I need to become more assertive, I need to become a better listener, I need to relinquish some control, I need to become more accepting of certain things etc.*)

- **Number on goal is to work together for the children well being, point and simple. Stay focus what's important raising the children in the right way.**