

FROM PARENT WARS



To
Co-Parenting

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Research shows that in the years after a divorce, the most poorly adjusted children are those whose parents involve them in continuing conflicts.

-Edward Teyber

Helping Children Cope with Divorce

I. DECLARATION OF WAR

A strange game, the only winning move is not to play
-War Games

When parents war, children lose. Think about this. When parents continually fight before and after a divorce or a paternity case, who wins? No one. What happens? Your children are caught in the crossfire. They become wounded psychologically - depressed, fearful, insecure, disillusioned, vulnerable and hopeless. Is "letting it all out" and "taking the other parent to the cleaners" really worth the price your children will pay?

Nearly every parent who is facing divorce or going through a custody case wonders and worries about the effect it will have on their children. This is a valid concern, and should always be your foremost consideration when making decisions about your family. Your children will be impacted. There is no hiding this fact, and it shouldn't be something that you BURY your head in the sand about. REMEMBER how **you** behave and act is the most important determinant of how your children will feel and cope.

II. THE ENEMY

Conflict cannot survive without participation

-Dr. Wayne Dyer

Taking Sides

One landmine for parents and children is when a parent, however subtly, tries to sway the children in to “taking their side” on matters. You may no longer love your partner, but your children do. You must not say or do anything to make your children question whether they should love the other parent.

In most homes and under most circumstances, children have grown up loving both of their parents. To make a child, no matter how unintentionally, feel as though s/he shouldn't love the other parent, or s/he should feel guilty for wanting to spend time with the other parent can hurt not only your child but your child's relationship with the other parent and your child's relationship with you.

A child's parents are the two people in the entire world that a child wants to love and trust more than anyone else. It is extremely harmful to a child, no matter what age, to be placed in a situation where s/he must choose between these two people. No child should ever be made to take sides. There should be no sides.

The Grief Process

Your children are grieving. This is the death of their family as they know it. You and your children will go through a grief process

similar to the grief process that people go through when a loved one dies. The stages are:

Denial

“This isn’t happening....I don’t believe this....”

Anger

Acting out, openly hostile

Bargaining

“Maybe if I were a better person....Maybe if I had only acted a different way....”

Depression

Hopelessness, despair, tearfulness, fatigue

and ultimately:

Acceptance

There is no set amount of time for each stage. It’s not unusual for parents and children to go through these stages at different times. For example, one parent may have been contemplating a divorce or separation for several months or years and have already worked through many of these stages. The other parent and children may have had no forewarning and may still be going through the first few stages. Parents should be aware of this when communicating with their children and the other parent.

III. THE WEAPONS

Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Bag Of Tricks

Some parents play games such as “I want to intimidate you”, “I want to frighten you”, “I don’t like you”, and “I’m here to wage a war with you”. These games only raise the stakes for the children. Some parents will become so wrapped up in the drama, they will continue to participate in the game until they can “win” - no matter what the cost. To them, punishing the other parent for what they believe the other has done to them and the family is more important than dealing with the reality of the here and now and protecting their children from further damage.

Courtroom Drama

A symptom of this “win at all costs” mentality can be seen in cases where the parents constantly take each other back to court for reasons other than the right ones - meaning every reason other than those which will help their children come through this process as emotionally sound as possible.

Fighting over inconsequential matters, just to keep the fight going, and just to prove you are right not only hurts your child, but drains you of necessary financial resources and allows you less energy and time to spend with your child. There simply is no winning this kind of game.

False Allegations

Another weapon parents sometimes use involves throwing around words like “abuse”, making derogatory comments about the other’s personal life and insinuating, or openly accusing, the other of being an “unfit parent”. Some parents make allegations of drug or alcohol abuse: “He is nothing but an alcoholic...”, “She’s just a pill popper...” In these situations, the accusing party will do anything to continue “the game” and make whatever accusations he desires just to invite drama. These involve words of aggression, and do nothing but harm the child. Under these circumstances, the child is being used as a pawn, and it is only when the parent feels as though he has isolated the other parent from the child that he feels victory. The child, however, has suffered a grave loss.

IV. THE BATTLES

The true battlefield is within
-Gandhi

A Cold War

Unlike the previous scenarios, some parents truly don't intend to involve their children in their fighting. These parents may have even convinced themselves that they have been successful. They erroneously believe that since they don't openly fight with their ex-partner in front of the children that the children aren't being affected by their battles. This is simply not true.

When a parent continues to hold hostility, anger or blame inside it is going to be expressed one way or another. **Children are much more perceptive than most adults realize.** A parent's continued anger will eventually be expressed in front of the children. This may be in subtle ways-

- Being passive aggressive
- Making derogatory remarks about the other parent
- Telling your child, "You don't have to listen to your father"
- Saying to your child, "Look at what your mother's lawyer is saying now"

These cold war tactics (even subconsciously) are just as damaging to a child as an open fight between his parents.

Cold wars are generally born out of a refusal to forgive, to move past what happened when the family lived together and to accept the change in the family. Your child didn't ask for the divorce or breakup and shouldn't be drawn into the Cold War.

The Hostages

You may feel as though you have the right to deny visitation to the other parent when he or she is late or behind in child support payments. Legally, the right to visitation is separate from the payment of child support. Practically, it is not your child's fault his parent is late or behind in child support and you shouldn't use your child as a hostage to get the other parent to pay. This may not be your intent and you may even feel justified in withholding visitation, yet you must realize that by doing this you are not punishing the guilty parent so much as you are punishing your child. This may be a victory in your mind, but is a disaster for your child.

Some courts have taken this and other child issues that typically arise during a breakup and have developed an order for divorcing or separated parents which governs their conduct toward their children and one another. This is one example of such an order:

PROPER CONDUCT OF DIVORCED AND/OR SEPARATED PARENTS:

As you know, your children are usually the losers when their parents separate. They are deprived of the full-time, proper guidance that two parents can give - guidance and direction essential to their moral and spiritual growth.

Although there is probably some bitterness between you, it should not be inflicted upon your children. In every child's mind, there must and should be an image or two good parents. Your future conduct with your children will be helpful if you observe and comply with the following.

1. Do not poison your child's mind against either their mother or father by discussing their shortcomings.
2. Do not use your visitation as an excuse to continue arguments with your spouse or former partner.

3. Do not visit your children if you have been drinking or engaging in any kind of illegal drug use.
4. Do not visit your children at unreasonable times.
5. Do not fail to notify your spouse or former partner as soon as possible if you are unable to keep your visitation. It's unfair to your children to keep them waiting and worse to disappoint them by not coming at all.
6. Make your visitation as pleasant as possible for your children by **NOT** questioning them regarding the activities of your spouse or former partner and by **NOT** making extravagant promises which you know you cannot or will not keep.
7. The parent with whom the children live **MUST** prepare them both physically and mentally for the visitation. The children should be available at the time mutually agreed upon.
8. If one parent has plans for the children that conflicts with the visitation and these plans are in the best interests of the children, be adults and work out the problem together.
9. Always work for the spiritual well-being health and happiness, and safety of your children.

V. CASUALTIES

If a child lives with hostility he learns to fight

-Dorothy Law Nolte

“Your father is just a sperm donor....” “Your stepmother has been more of a real mother to you than your own mother....”

Although intended as an attack on the other parent, how would these kinds of remarks make the child listening to them feel? One child even described statements like this as an attack on herself. She said she felt as though her parent was trying to make her feel stupid for loving her other parent. These attacks, while intended for one target (the other parent), hit and wound the innocent child.

While children go through the same grief process as adults, they are not as logical, rational or as world wise as adults. After they work through the initial stages, they will find themselves at the “bargaining stage”. When remarks about how bad the other parent is, or how the other parent never participates, or pays their child support on time, etc., are heard by a child going through this stage just imagine the effect it has on him/her:

“If only I would get straights A’s, Dad would come around more and Mom wouldn’t be mad all the time....”

“If only I would eat less, I wouldn’t cost Dad so much money and he wouldn’t be mad at Mom for not paying child support....”

Their interpretation of your anger may cause them to blame themselves for what’s happening. This can have serious effects on their emotional well-being. It might also delay their healing and progression through the grief process.

VI. THE AFTERMATH

You can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake.

-Jeanette Rankin

Effects on Children

What has the greatest impact on how children survive their parents' breakup? **HOW THEIR PARENTS TREAT EACH OTHER!** If you continue to battle one another and pull your child into the fray, you will detrimentally affect them.

Blink your eyes and your children are grown. They are graduating and leaving to start their own lives. You only get one shot, and you don't get to go back. So think about what you are doing to your children by continuing to wage war with your ex-partner. Is proving yourself right really worth the effect it has on your child?

VII. CO-PARENTING

The real and lasting victories are those of peace, and not of war
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

A Business Relationship

Co-parenting is about putting your own interests aside and doing what is best for your child. Almost every divorce or separation has to do with selfishness of at least one party at some time or another. Co-parenting is about putting aside the question, "How are my needs going to be met?" and asking instead, "How are my children's needs going to be met?"

The co-parenting relationship is much like the relationship between business associates. The business is how best to raise your children. If they put anger, disappointment and hurt aside, most parents admit their ultimate goals for their children are the same. They both want their children to be healthy and happy. Co-parenting is about recognizing those joint goals and working together in a business-like manner to help your child reach them.

If you still have doubts about co-parenting, stop and think: your child did not ask to be placed in this untenable situation. You, the adults, have placed him/her there and you are the only ones who can make the situation bearable.

Communication Is The Key

You may not have been able to communicate with your spouse or partner during the marriage or living together, but you must

find a way to do so now. Since you want your children to be successful in life, you and your ex-partner will have to learn better communication skills.

TEN TIPS FOR CO-PARENTING

1. Make your child's happiness and well-being your number one joint goal.
2. Treat the other parent in "a business-like manner".
3. Treat your child as a child, not as an adult confidant, messenger or spy.
4. Encourage your child's relationship with the other parent.
5. Communicate directly with the other parent.
6. Make visitation exchanges pleasant and happy.
7. Take a parenting class.
8. Pay your child support on time.
9. Be patient and flexible.
10. Get counseling if you need it.

X. MEDIATION

Mediation is a way for parents to talk to one another with the help of a specially trained neutral person - the mediator. The mediator is not there to make decisions for you. A mediator is not a judge or jury. Rather a mediator is there to help you and your partner work through your differences and the conflicts that are preventing the two of you from being able to effectively communicate. A mediator is neutral and not there to "take sides" or tell one parent they are right or wrong. The mediator's primary purpose and goal is to stimulate communication.

The Parenting Plan

Family mediation helps separated or separating parents develop a written Parenting Plan which will guide them in their day to day dealings with each other and with their children.

Mediation helps you, the parents, discuss and decide specific parenting issues, like:

- Who is going to take the child to the doctor?
- What will you do if your child's grades fall below a certain level?
- How will you discipline your children?
- Where will your children be on holidays?
- When will your children live with each parent?
- Other matters that you may not have been able to discuss previously without arguing and injecting other emotions and feelings into the discussion.

Basic Mediation Steps

A common question about mediation is “How does it work?” The following is an illustration of a typical family mediation.

Mediation Steps

1. Parents together meet with a neutral person (the mediator).
2. One parent explains own views without interruption.
3. Then the other parent explains own views without interruption.
4. One parent can meet alone with the mediator (caucus).
5. The other parent can caucus with the mediator.
6. The mediator keeps the discussion going.
7. The mediator takes notes.
8. All keep working until an agreement is reached.
9. The mediator types the final Parenting Plan.
10. The parents with the help of their lawyers, revise the Parenting Plan.
11. The parents sign the plan.

Of course, the above mediation scenario may not be followed in the exact manner in every mediation, but this is typically what you can expect to encounter when going through the mediation process.

Confidentiality Parent + Mediator + Parent = Confidential Communication

Mediation is a confidential process. This means the mediator cannot be called to testify on behalf of either parent. The mediator is not there to advocate either party's side or prove your point or your ex-partner's point. Nor is the mediator there for you or your ex-partner to use as a witness against the other in some subsequent court proceeding. It simply doesn't work that way.

A mediator's sole purpose is to open the lines of communication so the parents can come up with their own solutions. For this purpose,

the communications made during the mediation are and will remain completely confidential.

Basic Mediation Rules **Effective Communication = Workable Parenting Plan**

Despite its informal nature, mediation could not exist without certain ground rules. These are not suggestions, they are **RULES**. In order for the mediation to be successful the following must be adhered to:

- TREAT EACH OTHER WITH RESPECT
- NO YELLING OR SCREAMING
- NO NAME CALLING
- NO DISCOUNTS
- NO PUT DOWNS
- ONLY ONE PERSON TALKS AT A TIME

Sometimes mediators keep everyone together in one room, other times they will break the parties up in to “caucuses” where they can talk to each side privately. The purpose of all mediation is to get communication flowing effectively to resolve problems. When people can talk to one another and really understand what the other is saying then finding a solution to their problems is a realistic, achievable goal.

DIVORCE AND PARENTING RESOURCES

Publications

1. American Bar Association Handbooks
Divorce Forms:

The Never-Ending Divorce
Surviving Your Divorce
Co-Parenting After Divorce
My Parents Are Getting a Divorce

ABA Publication Orders
P.O. Box 10892
Chicago, IL 60610-0892
1 800-285-2221

2. ***Helping Children Cope with Divorce***, By Edward Teyber

3. Family Communications, Inc. Books:

Helping Children With Divorce
Let's Talk About It: Divorce,
by Fred Rogers
Let's Talk About It: Step families,
by Fred Rogers
Mister Rogers Talks with Parents,
by Fred Rogers and Barry Head
Mister Rogers Talks with Families About Divorce,
by Fred Rogers and Clare O'Brien

Family Communications, Inc.
4802 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 687-2990
www.misterrogers.org

4. ***Making Divorce Easier on Your Child:***
50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust
by Nicholas Long, Ph.D. and Rex Forehand, Ph.D.

5. *Trans-Parenting: Moving Families Through Change*

Families First

1105 West Peachtree Street, N.E.

P.O. Box 7948, Station C

Atlanta, GA 30357-0948

www.familiesfirst.org

Websites

Arkansas Alternative Dispute Resolution Commission

<http://courts.state.ar.us/courts/adr.html>

American Bar Association Family Law Section

<http://www.abanet.org/family/>

Arkansas Bar Association

www.arkbar.com

Arkansas Children's Hospital

www.ach.uams.edu

Centers for Youth and Families

www.youthandfamilies.org

The Parent Center

www.parentcenter.com

Family Services Agency

www.fsasf.org

My Co-Parenting Commitment

I state and commit to myself and my child that I will do everything within my power to enable my child to have the happiest and best childhood possible. In order to accomplish this goal, I promise to do the following:

1. I will treat my child as a child and not use him as a spy.
2. I will speak positively about the other parent to avoid hurting my child.
3. I will encourage my child to love both his parents.
4. I will talk about adult problems with other adults and not my child
5. I will pay my child support on time
6. I will not use my child as a pawn.
7. I will encourage and support my child's visits with the other parent.
8. I will communicate directly with the other parent and not use my child as a messenger.
9. I will treat the other parent with respect and courtesy so my child will do the same.
10. I will remember that raising a child requires patience, tolerance and flexibility.

I pledge to myself and my child that I will do my best everyday to remember these promises and help my child have a healthy and happy childhood

Signature

Date

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