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SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS WHO ARE SEPARATING OR DIVORCING

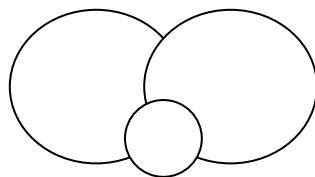
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ROLE CHANGES: FROM HUSBAND AND WIFE TO MOM AND DAD

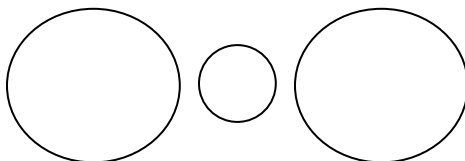
The first step in the transition is to rethink your roles. You are no longer husband and wife, so you should no longer behave as husband and wife. This is a “letting go” process that involves the loss of a central relationship in your life. *But you are still mom and dad.* How you relate to one another as parents will influence how well your child does after divorce. You need to separate your former role as spouse from your role as a parent, and sort out what feelings and behaviors belong where.

Married couples don’t usually divide their feelings and activities in this way, so the process of letting go of the spousal relationship – of separating emotionally – takes time and considerable effort. This “letting go” process is further complicated because parents continue to share something very important – their children. Letting go of the spousal relationship, yet strengthening the parental relationship is critical for the children’s success after divorce.

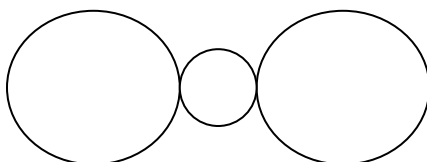
FAMILY BREAK-UP AND REORGANIZATION



MARRIAGE



BREAK-UP



CO-PARENTING

Maintaining a parental relationship after divorce requires an ability to communicate about child-related issues such as health, school and schedule without bringing in the marital and issues. Confining communication to child-related issues can feel strange and unnatural at first. But allowing old marital issues and feelings into your new parenting relationship can interfere with effective communication and decision-making. If you don’t limit the agenda to the children, old wounds and angers may resurface, leaving the needs of the children neglected. It is easy, and often tempting, to get stuck in the old battles.



THE CO-PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP

Divorcing parents often have times when they wish their former spouse would “disappear” from their lives, or that they could erase the last years with their spouse. *But when there are children, a divorce can end the marriage but it does not end the family.*

By perpetuating the myth that divorcing parents can walk away from each other and no longer need a relationship, society and the adversarial legal system do not help parents. When parents are pitted against one another in the courtroom in child custody disputes, the parenting relationship so necessary for the children is further undermined. By creating a “winner” and a “loser” it is the children who lose their right to a full relationship with both parents.

Children need a respectful and cooperative relationship between their parents. The court, through this seminar and its program of referral to mediation and counseling services, is actively encouraging parents to resolve their disputes and rebuild a cooperative parenting relationship.

ROADBLOCKS TO COOPERATION

As the marriage breaks down, couples often find their earlier feelings of love and trust transformed into feelings of intense anger, resentment and distrust. Parents may feel competition with each other and try to “win over” the child. This competition may be further expressed by trying to prove each is the better parent in the courtroom.

Parents may struggle with how to interact with one another. They may try to avoid dealing with their anger by not speaking, or explode with angry arguments when they do speak. Isolina Ricci, in her book, Mom’s House, Dad’s House, refers to divorced couples who continue their involvement in a negative, destructive relationship as “hostility junkies”. Whether parents get stuck in the anger phase of the emotional divorce, or can resolve the anger and resentment and move toward cooperation, determines to a great extent whether their children can master the divorce trauma and make a positive adjustment.

PAIN GAMES

Adapted from “Pain Games.” Copyright Johnson County Mental health Center, Mission, Kansas, 1986.

Parents don’t want their children to suffer from the disruption and anger of divorce, but sometimes parents may try to ease their own pain in ways that unintentionally put their children in the middle. A central task for parents is to separate out their feelings toward each other as spouses from what their children need from them as parents.



WHAT PARENTS CAN DO: HELPFUL TIPS ABOUT DIVORCE

1. Tell the children about the divorce. Be honest and frank with them. Helping your children understand your divorce may be the most difficult task as parents.
2. Let the children know that both parents still love them even though living apart. Children of divorce often feel lost. They need assurance that they will be loved and cared for even after their parents separate.
3. Learn to talk with your divorced spouse about matters concerning the children. Although divorce ends a marriage, it should not put an end to the family.
4. Try to understand your own feelings and how to cope with them. Divorce has the potential for personal growth. It need not be emotionally destructive.
5. Help your children handle their feelings. Children react differently. The kind of help they need varies with their age.
6. Think about the good things you shared in your marriage. This can help overcome bitterness which often accompanies divorce.
7. If you are a visiting parent, be punctual and faithful in your appointments. Children are hurt by broken promises.
8. Tell the children only what they can grasp and understand. It is difficult for parents to know what to say and when.
9. Avoid saying unkind things to the children about the other parent. Children should be free to form their own opinions. They should be encouraged to see the good in each person.
10. Don't use the children to spy on the other parent's activities. Children should not be used as a "pipeline" for information.
11. Keep the children out of your own fighting. Children should not be caught in the battleground between their parents.
12. Try not to be a Santa Claus (if you are a visiting parent). This only makes it harder for the parent who has the day-to-day care.
13. Remember that you can't buy the children's affection through expensive gifts. The best gift is yourself, your time, and your love.
14. Don't involve children with your new friends of the opposite sex. Children need time to adjust to the separation of their parents before they can be expected to accept third parties.
15. Seek professional help if your problems become more than you can handle.



GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL POST-DIVORCE PARENTING

These guidelines may help create a parenting partnership which is crucial for children of parents of divorce. The idea is to keep a relationship for the business of raising healthy children.

- ◆ Your mutual concern is your children. Decide to create a successful partnership for continuing to be parents despite the ending of the marriage.
- ◆ Give your ex the benefit of the doubt as to behaviour, as you would a stranger. Do not assume anything based on past experience. There may be current reasons for your ex-spouse's behaviour, thoughts, feelings, and decisions.
- ◆ Respect your children's relationship with your ex-spouse. Your children did not divorce either parent. Encourage them to get over any feelings of estrangement from the other parent.
- ◆ Do not expect approval from your ex-spouse. Have your personal and emotional needs fulfilled elsewhere and with others.
- ◆ Ask your ex-spouse to adopt these guidelines for working together as parents. If your ex-spouse refuses, use these guidelines yourself as much as possible.
- ◆ If you are able to say something positive about your ex-spouse's parenting, do so. Expressed appreciation, no matter how small, contributes to greater success of the parenting partnership.
- ◆ Be businesslike with your former spouse. Test your own behaviour by asking: "Was I businesslike? Did I follow these guidelines?"
- ◆ Do not discuss matters not related to the children unless your partner agrees to do so. Respect your ex's privacy; do not seek the details of his/her life or intrude on his/her territory.
- ◆ Test your ex-spouse's behaviour not by how you feel, but by the same standard: was his/her behaviour businesslike?
- ◆ Make all agreements clear and follow-up with written confirmation when possible (or make your own written agreement). Be clear and complete in your communication; include time, place, whether children will be fed or not, what clothes they need, etc. Communicate directly: **do not** ask the children to do your business.



- ◆ Make appointments to talk about the children. Except for emergencies, call only during agreed upon times. Ask if the time is convenient. If not, make an appointment for a time that is.
- ◆ Keep agreements. Do not break appointments. Carry out what you promised. If you can't promise something, make it clear that you can't and say why.
- ◆ Be polite. Do not use bad language or name call. Do not discuss issues under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. If you feel yourself getting unbusiness-like, agree to talk at a later time.
- ◆ Before making decisions, consult your partner and the children so that the most workable decision can be made.
- ◆ Don't insist on what does not work. Be flexible; commit yourself as much as you are able to and experiment to see what does work. Children's needs change as they get older.
- ◆ You can only control your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Accept that you cannot control your ex-spouse's.
- ◆ Promote good will in the partnership. Think of the importance of your investment and expected returns. The investment is what you will do for your children's happiness and success in life. The returns are comfort and security for your children, and the children knowing their parents care enough to work together for them. A good working relationship with your former spouse will help make a better life for you and your children.
- ◆ Try not to compare households. Parents often have different styles, financial resources, etc. Children can learn flexibility by experiencing different lifestyles.



GETTING STUCK IN NEGATIVE INTIMACY

When people first marry, they usually have loving feelings and a high level of emotional and personal involvement. In a loving relationship, people trust and respect one another, feel supported and share many intimacies about themselves. People feel loyal and try hard to maintain the relationship through a variety of efforts, including compromise.

When a couple divorces, those positive feelings may be transformed into anger, resentment and distrust. Divorcing, and even long divorced couples, can be bound together in a negative hostile relationship as securely as in a positive loving relationship. This is called a *negative attachment*. While many struggle during the early stages of separation with resentment, blame and a desire to punish their former spouse, when parents get *stuck* in a hostile post-divorce relationship, they have not divorced emotionally. The relationship continues to preoccupy them and drain their energy.

THE RETREAT FROM INTIMACY

Moving away from an intimate marital relationship towards a “businesslike” relationship focused on the children, is a major task for divorcing adults. Business relationships and intimate relationships have very different rules and expectations and very different degrees of personal involvement.

The characteristics of an intimate relationship compared to a businesslike relationship can be illustrated in the diagram below.

<u>INTIMATE</u>	<u>BUSINESSLIKE</u>
Many assumptions	No assumptions
Unspoken / Unwritten expectations	Explicit agreements, contracts
Informal	Formal courtesies, structured interactions, meetings, specific agendas
High emotional intensity and personal involvement	Low emotional intensity and personal involvement
Low personal privacy	High personal privacy
High personal disclosure	Low personal disclosure

Adapted from Ricci, I. (1980) *Mom's House, Dad's House*, N.Y.: MacMillan.



PSYCHOLOGICAL TASKS OF CO-PARENTS

1. Accept the idea that while the marriage is ending, you will be parents forever. The family is not ending, it is being reorganized.
2. While you no longer share together as husband and wife, you do share love and mutual concern for your children. This is the new basis of your relationship.
3. You need to separate the children's needs and concerns from your own. Your child does not experience your former spouse the way you do.
4. You need to focus on the strengths in your relationship – what you've done well together as parents – and build on those strengths.
5. You need to create new boundaries in the relationship with the other parent:
 - a. Build from the ground up. Don't assume old patterns, build new ones.
 - b. Clarify new expectations.
 - c. Remember you need to think of and behave toward your former spouse as your business partner in raising the children, rather than as your spouse.

COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIORAL SKILLS TO CO-PARENT

1. Limit the communication to child related issues.
2. Don't let marital issues into the discussions. If your former spouse can't keep old marital disagreements out of the conversations, suggest resuming discussion later.
3. Don't blame the other parent.
4. Speak in "I messages".
5. Be courteous and respectful, even if you don't feel he or she deserves it.
6. Don't expect appreciation or praise from the other parent.
7. Act like a guest in the other parent's home.
8. Be explicit and detailed about child-related issues when speaking with the other parent.