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How to Think and Act Like a Co-Parent

By Brette Sember

Upon your divorce or separation, you and the other parent don't suddenly just magically become co-parents (parents who work together as a team for their child's best interest). It takes a lot of hard work and many ups and downs to craft a relationship that allows you to cooperate together in a way that benefits your child. You separated or divorced because you couldn't see eye to eye on many things, and it is unreasonable to expect that you will be able to immediately step away from all of that and become a cheery, friendly, co-parenting couple. It takes months and years to forge a new relationship as parents together. No matter how long it takes or how difficult it is, finding a way to cooperate together as parents ultimately does pay off.

Good Co-Parenting Benefits Your Child

Divorce or separation is devastating for children. I saw many reactions in the children I represented as a Law Guardian. It is normal for children of divorce to experience anger, sadness, helplessness, fear, and withdrawal. Note that any extreme behavior or serious depression requires treatment by a mental health professional.

It is impossible for you as a parent to fully protect your child from the impact of the divorce. Your family has changed, and you have to expect that your child will need time to adjust to that change. However, how you and the other parent handle the change of the divorce, and the years after it, has a huge impact on what kind of experience it is for your child. The purpose of your divorce was likely to end the fighting, improve how you both feel, and create happier lives for everyone. If you go through the divorce, only to continue to argue and foster unpleasant feelings towards the other parent, you haven't really made a lot of improvements in your family's life.

Developing a relationship with the other parent that is low conflict, pleasant on the surface, and routine will help your child relax and begin to feel more comfortable with this new arrangement. You will be able to focus more directly on your child's needs. Your child will function better if she knows that there are two parents united behind her. You cannot give your child the proper support and attention if you and the other parent always focus on what the other is doing wrong or continue to dredge up bad feelings from your relationship as a couple.

Think About the Other Parent

Learning to co-parent means making a mental shift in the way you think about the other person. This is a person who has undoubtedly hurt you, let you down, insulted you, or worked against you in your marriage or the end of your marriage or relationship. It may seem like a tall order to somehow set that aside and smilingly co-parent together. What you need to do is mentally compartmentalize your relationship with the other parent. In one room goes all your feelings about him or her as your partner, spouse or lover. All the hurt and anger from the divorce goes behind that door. You can go in that room whenever you need to, to work through those feelings. In another room goes your relationship with this person as parents. In this room there is a table where you can sit and work together to create a good life for your child. On the walls are photos of your child in happy moments. This is the room you must mentally place yourself in when you are dealing with the other parent in a parenting situation.

You must make the firm decision to separate your spousal relationship from your parenting relationship. It can sometimes be hard to sit in one room in your mind, while you know that other room is next door. But you must direct your attention to cooperating with the other parent, and welcoming him or her into your child's life so that your child can have the benefit of two parents who are reasonable, pleasant, and accommodating to each other.

Forgive Yourself

It may seem as though co-parenting is all about your interaction with the other parent, but a big part is your internal thought process. Although you have to learn to forgive or at least let go of things the other parent has done, you must also forgive yourself for anything you secretly believe you've done - whether to the other parent or to your child. Everyone who goes through the emotional turmoil of a divorce makes mistakes and you need to tell yourself it is ok. You also need to learn to forgive yourself for the slip-ups you will make as you co-parent. No one can keep up a perfect façade at all times. You're going to lose your temper, be inflexible, or let your hurt get the best of you some of the time in your dealings with the other parent. Tell yourself it's okay and that you will simply try harder the next time.

Talk to the Other Parent

It is essential that you and the other parent have open lines of communication. You need to be able to talk about your child and make cooperative decisions. If you are able to talk naturally to the other parent in a pleasant and reasonable way, you're on the right path. But if you find yourself gritting your teeth, shouting, or getting upset, decide that you are going to treat your conversations in a detached, business-like way. You have to conduct the business of parenting together, so treat it like a business transaction. You would not let your temper get the better of you in most business situations, so try to be polite to your ex in the same way you would to a stranger you are working with. I worked with one family that kept ending up back in court. The bottom line was that they could not communicate in any reasonable way. Every time they exchanged children, they had a blow up. They finally went to a couples therapist who had them practice discussing only the situation at hand, and putting their emotions and problems with each other on the back burner to be dealt with at another time. It worked and when they had to do the business of parenting, they were able to focus only on that task and keep the rest of their problems separate.

Get Help with Co-Parenting Problems

Co-parenting may not come naturally to you, particularly if you are a high conflict couple, or you are still recovering from the nastiness of the divorce. There are lots of ways to get help with your parenting relationship though. First, taking a co-parenting class together (even if you go at separate times) can be very helpful. Many state court systems now make these classes mandatory for all divorcing couples, but if it is not required in your area, check with your attorney, the court clerk, or with the state department of mental health services to find a class near you.

Therapists are also invaluable to co-parents. It may be helpful for your child to have a therapist he or she can talk with about the situation. This therapist may be able to help you and your ex work together to help your child. Seeking a couples therapist who can help you improve your co-parenting skills is another important step. If you have serious disagreements about the parenting plan itself, a mediator can help you work through them and come to an agreement that will work for everyone.

*Brette Sember is a former divorce attorney and mediator and the author of *The Divorce Organizer & Planner* (McGraw-Hill), *How to Parent with Your Ex* (Sourcebooks), and *No-Fight Divorce* (McGraw-Hill). Her web site is www.BretteSember.com.*

