



# **PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAM**

**Program Contact Information**  
**Hockanum Valley Community Council, Inc.**

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## **Outline of Parenting Education Program**

- I. Introduction and Welcome**
- II. Emotional Process of Divorce/Separation**
- III. What Is Co-Parenting?**
- IV. Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children**
- V. Conflict Resolution and Communication**
- VI. Clarifying Boundaries**
- VII. Raising Resilient Children**
- VIII. Wrap Up, Resources, Surveys**

# **Parenting Education Program**

## **I. Introduction and Welcome**

**Introduction of facilitators and program:** While this program is a court mandated program it is not a “How to be a good parent class.” Recognizing that your children will have parents in separate homes, it is imperative that you learn to “parent co-operatively”, thus the phrase “Co-Parenting.” It is our goal to make this an educational and interactive experience. We will spend 6 hours discussing a variety of topics which will equip you as parents to be better communicators with your children, as well as with your co-parent. While your intimate relationship with your child’s other parent may be ending, it is important to understand that your role and responsibilities as co-parents will continue. Remember that this is all about helping you and your child move successfully through this process.

### **Ice Breaker Activity**

## **II. Emotional Process of Divorce/Separation**

### **FINISHING THE GRIEVING: A KEY TO LIFE AFTER DIVORCE**

Have you ever encountered people almost passionately anxious to show you how little they were hurting over their divorces? Commonly these people want to spray a lot of rage, and they often get immersed in senseless and destructive battles with their spouses.

But above all, they seem to want to show the world—and themselves—just how much they don't feel/hurt.

*The greatest weakness of all is the great fear of appearing weak.*  
*--Jacques Benigne Bossuet*

It doesn't take much examination of the losses of divorce to see that there is more to it than rage and wrangling. Shock, sadness, hurt, and fear are at the least as much a part of the experience.

**If you are in the midst of a divorce, you are likely losing most, if not all, of the following:**

- Your partner in building memories and dreams of growing old together
- Your ally in facing money woes, illness, and even school conferences
- Your companion to parties, weddings, family celebrations, and IRS audits
- Your confederate in lovingly outwitting your children
- Your helpmate who knew just how to unclog the sink, negotiate a car deal, or remember birthdays
- Your roommate in creating a family home
- Your forgiving audience to your feeble jokes
- Your date for Saturday night
- Your bedmate & your friend

## **II. Emotional Process of Divorce/Separation (Cont.)**

**And as you are losing this person, you are also losing:**

- Consistent contact with your children
- Valued rituals
- Inside jokes
- The chance to share family memories
- Your spouse's family and friends
- Most of your financial security
- Friendships of people who related with you as a couple
- Predictability in much of your life
- Your sense of personal competence

*Of course* you are feeling more than anger—an emotion that is very often a secondary or “cover” emotion for others.

What's more, the feelings of shock, sadness, hurt, and fear do not end when a divorce is concluded legally. The emotional divorce is not a legal event, but a process. For divorcing people, the question is not *whether* they will experience that process and its enormous emotional challenges, but *how*.

*What we grieve for is not the loss of a grand vision, but rather the loss of common things, events, and gestures. Ordinarity is the most precious thing we struggle for. --Irena Kelfisz*

The depth of our losses explains this telling observation from Judge Terry A. Crone: *Couples come to court disputing what? Almost always they say it's over who gets the velvet Elvis painting. I swear, every case has a velvet Elvis painting. But it's never over the painting, it's over their hurt.*

## **II. Emotional Process of Divorce/Separation (Cont.)**

**Divorce/Separation represents the death of a marriage and/or relationship.** This includes all the hopes and dreams that went into it. And the death of relationship, like any death, requires a grieving process for healing.

**During a divorce/separation, many people will experience a grieving process resembling Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving; (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). When experienced temporarily as part of the process of grieving, each step has its beneficial purposes. *But*, each stage also holds great risks for anyone who uses it as a final destination.**

Here are some guides on the five stages that may help you in your journey.

1) ***Denial***: “She just needs some time,” or “He’s acting out some midlife crisis,” or “This only happens to other people”—these are some of the hallmark phrases of denial. It’s a numbing response that often follows a refusal to acknowledge a loss as oceanic as divorce/separation. But like all stages, denial is meant to last only a limited time.

### ***Benefits from denial if experienced as a temporary stage:***

- Appropriately experienced, this protective reaction serves to blunt the initial shock and pain of the breakup.
- It can give temporary—but only temporary—shelter from the unthinkable until you gather your abilities to face the emotional, physical, and parental tasks at hand.
- Experienced in a healthy fashion, denial eventually gives way to a mature acknowledgment of the pain of the losses of divorce/separation. That pain can then be a signal to you to take good care of yourself during your losses and recovery.

### ***Risks from denial if experienced as a final destination:***

- Any refusal to acknowledge the necessary end of an intimate relationship interferes with making important decisions—for oneself and the entire family.

- More important, **pain is part of the healing process**, and anyone unwilling to feel and acknowledge the pain can't heal or move to better decision-making.

*No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.  
--C. S. Lewis*

**2) Anger:** As the numbing effects of the shock wear off, the intense feelings of pain, hurt, and fear rush in to flood your senses. Anger is a mechanism for deflecting these emotions. This is both a normal and necessary reaction to the enormity of the loss you may feel. Although you need to recognize and accept feelings of anger, it is essential that you avoid angry behavior toward your co-parent and your children.

*Benefits from anger if experienced as a temporary stage:*

- Anger can serve to energize you and help you begin to make the difficult emotional break from your partner.

*Risks from anger if experienced as a final destination:*

- Anyone stuck in anger will likely be making poor judgments, expending unnecessary energy on futile conflict, and devastating the children.
- Although staying angry may *feel* like being in control, it actually renders one bitter, resentful, and unable to think or act in anything but the most uncontrolled and self-destructive ways.

*Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. --Helen Keller*

**3) Bargaining:** In divorce/separation, bargaining is usually an attempt to avoid the end of a relationship by promising to act differently, or by imagining or asking for changes that one hopes could make the relationship work. Bargaining is another attempt to gain control over what may feel like an utterly out-of-control circumstance.

*Benefits from bargaining if experienced as a temporary stage:*

- Bargaining is helpful when there is a chance your relationship can be saved.
- Counseling (couples and/or individual), a period of separation, or relationship renewal groups can help you see if such hopes are realistic. (**And, by all means, if your circumstances are not dangerous ones, there is every reason to move slowly and soberly before ending a relationship.**)

*Risks from bargaining if experienced as a final destination:*

- Staying stuck in the bargaining stage is often acted out by a partner trying to continue a marital connection.
- Desperate promises, unrealistic attempts at reconciliation, and inappropriate sexual overtures can be part of the pattern.
- Sometimes being stuck in bargaining occurs with “negative intimacy” where former partners behave as if they have a right to be “key players” in each others lives.
- They can delude themselves into thinking they should (or can) tell their partners how to clean their houses, how to spend their money, or how much macaroni and cheese should or should not be served to the kids.

**Being stuck in the bargaining phase prevents achieving the emotional “clean break” necessary for healing,** and very often lies at the heart of the expensive, destructive, and outright dangerous legal maneuvering that many couples repeatedly take to court.

*Remember, when either partner ends the relationship, neither has the right to be a major part in the other’s life, except as they cooperate as co-parents to their children.*

**4) Depression:** This is a normal and necessary part of grieving (and a critical time to be connected to a healthy support system of family and friends). As John Bradshaw reminds his readers, “He who grieves well, lives well.” So know that deep sadness is not necessarily a sign that you are failing, but indeed likely a sign of your healing.

***Benefits from depression if experienced as a temporary stage:***

- Sadness is necessary to grieving. To be able to grieve, heal, and then move on, you must acknowledge and accept this important but uncomfortable feeling.
- A wonderful treatment of the essential healthiness of temporary depression can be found in M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled*. **Peck speaks of depression as the conflict between our conscious wish for cherished things to be “the way they used to be” and our wiser (but often unconscious) sense that it is time to let go and move on.**

If you are stuck in the grieving process, there are few insights we could so heartily recommend as Peck’s short chapter in *The Road Less Traveled* called, “The Healthiness of Depression.”

***Risks from depression if experienced as a final destination:***

- Staying stuck in this stage may create a clinical depression in which deep and prolonged sadness interferes with daily living, disrupts sleep or appetite, and causes a loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities. If these symptoms persist for two or more weeks you may need the help of a mental health professional.
- Mental health professionals can help you relieve the depression and move toward acceptance, the last stage of the healing process.

**5) Acceptance:** This stage is not one of joy and great celebration, but of **acknowledging the reality of divorce and embracing the readiness to move on.** This stage is accompanied by a newfound realization of your resilience, potential, and commitment to forge a new life.

Although the five stages of grieving are necessary for healing, they are not always so clear-cut and concise. ***Most divorcing/separating persons move through the stages more than once. (Not necessarily in precisely the same order.)***

Sometimes you may experience more than one stage at the same time. However, you can be comforted by knowing the stages and by your ability to recognize what you're feeling and when. You should be heartened to know that with pain comes healing. If you feel yourself stuck, don't hesitate to seek some brief counseling.

Let these stages serve as your guide in divorce/separation, and be assured that after you move courageously through them, however long it takes, you'll find a safe harbor—and a stronger self.

### **Grieving Guide 1**

Consider where you are in your five stages of grieving (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance).

1. Do you sense that you have paid at least a brief visit to each of the first four stages?
2. Do you think there is any additional benefit to your remaining in a stage where you might be now?
3. Would it be helpful for you, either by yourself or with some counseling, to attempt to move to another stage?
4. How totally have you embraced an awareness that even the depression stage (when experienced temporarily) is beneficial, and that awaiting you at the end of this process is great strength and hope?

### **Grieving Guide 2**

Few things are as demanding as bringing the intimate marital relationship to a close and replacing it with a cooperative co-parenting relationship, and probably no one can accomplish this enormous task without helpful contacts.

Make a list here of at least three mature adults (a counselor, family and close friends, and support contacts are excellent possibilities) who have agreed to be available to you to talk through any difficult issue.

Please identify each person's relationship to you and the date on which you asked for and received each person's agreement to be available to you

<b>Name</b>	<b>Relationship to you</b>	<b>Date you asked for support</b>
1.		
2.		
3.		

1. How have you used these support contacts thus far?
2. What ways do you think would be useful for you to use them in the future?

### **III. What Is Co-Parenting?**

*“Co-Parenting is an agreement between two people to love and care for a child.”* It is therefore imperative that conflict between the Co-Parents is eliminated or at the most, very minimal and never in the presence of the child.

#### **Yeah, But You Don’t Know My Co-Parent**

One of the most common things we hear is, "I want to be cooperative, but my co-parent doesn't!" Here's help with that difficult challenge.

**1. Give yourself credit.**

Remember to honor yourself for everything you've done to protect your children from conflict. It is not easy.

**2. Remember the goal.**

Always remember to give your helpless children a safe place to live their one and only childhood. Your goal isn't to win a fight—it's to stop a fight to save your children.

**3. Appreciate the difference you can make alone.**

Your children are helped by having even one parent who gives them a safe sanctuary from a storm. You can help your children by: — Living by the Child Safety Zone Pledge - a promise to keep all conflict away from your children. — Writing 10 compliments and good memories about your co-parent - and making these kinds of comments the theme of everything you say to your children about their other parent. — Celebrating the things your children get to do with their other parent. — Cheerfully encouraging them to call their other parent. — Making it easy for your children to love their other parent.

**4. Understand the need for you to pick up the slack.**

The more your co-parent messes up, the more your children need you to excel.

**5. Use good resources.**

Visit the “Parents Corner” on UpToParents.org, spend time with people who have good divorces, and take advantage of child-focused mediation or counseling.

**6. Consider the subjectivity of it all.**

It's impossible to be completely objective in the middle of difficult family circumstances. The job of co-parents is to accept each other as they are and merge the strengths they bring to the table.

**7. Focus on those who really can't go it alone—your children.**

Remember that children don't have the resources you do. Let their helplessness be the final irresistible call to your heroism.

**8. Remember the joy.**

**You owe it to your children—and yourself—to enjoy your children.**

*Parents Corner – UpToParents.org*

### **III. What Is Co-Parenting?(Cont.)**

Since conflict between the Co-Parents is the #1 source of influence on the well-being of the child there are several things to consider:

- It takes strength and selflessness to consider the child's best interest.
- It takes mental strength to think of alternative ways to solve problems.
- It takes self control to decide how you will respond when your buttons are pushed by the Co-Parent.
- It takes emotional strength to "let go" of the pain and to move on to new or uncertain territory.

***"It is imperative that children are allowed to love both parents."***

Consider the following:

- Child may feel caught in the middle.
- Asking your child to report on their other parent makes the child feel trapped and unable to make a good decision.
- Don't say negative things in front of the child as this may cause anger or emotional outbursts.
- Don't burden the child with your emotional needs. They have enough on their plate already.

***"Understand that your long term role is changing."***

Understanding the following dynamics will aid in your transition as a Co-Parent:

- Disengage from the other parent. Using the term "Co-Parent" will help let go of the previous relationship both emotionally and physically.
- Learn to become business partners as you re-align to provide the best environment for the child living in two homes.
- Negotiating agreements is critical in Co-Parenting. Understanding that when one parent "wins" the child loses. That person is placing their own interest ahead of the child's best interest.
- Don't try to buy loyalty with gifts or money. These things grow old and you go broke!

### **III. What Is Co-Parenting?(Cont.)**

- Allow some down time when you are with your child. Taking a walk in the park can be much more productive than a movie or a day at the amusement park.

#### **Attachment Scale (Discussion):**

The attachment scale is a visual indicator of how emotionally attached you feel toward your co-parent. Since emotion comes in a variety of levels, from detached to extremely attached, and from angry to happy, a person may be attached one moment and detached the next. The scale below is not an indicator of where you are in the divorce process. It is merely a way to acknowledge where you are at a given moment.

**1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10**

#### **Detached**

No emotions  
No reactions  
Use business skills  
Future focused  
Disengaged

#### **Attached**

Strong positive or negative emotions  
Strong reactions  
Focus on emotions rather than content  
Mentally dwelling on former spouse  
Engaged through revenge, anger or hurt

**(Remember that it is normal to have an emotional reaction toward your co-parent when the situation has to do with your child.)**

### **III. What Is Co-Parenting?(Cont.)**

The “**uptoparents.org**” site is a great resource for parents and children alike. Parents can access and utilize the resources available to help their child as well as themselves through the process of divorce and/or separation.

**Developing positive comments about your co-parents is both a difficult and invaluable skill a parent needs to develop.** Children naturally want to talk about their parents, so being able to communicate in a positive way is critical to keeping your own line of communication with your children open.

*“The worst mistake we’ve seen some parents make in their breakups was believing they could nurture their children while being bitter toward their other parent. Children know.”*

CHARLIE & BARB ASHER/ WWW.UPTOPARENTS.ORG

*“When you speak negatively about your co-parent to or around your child you are verbally attacking someone they love!”*

SPS/HVCC

What should astound and inspire us is how so many parents—for all the hurt between them—heroically find ways to say to their children, “You get some great qualities from Dad/Mom.”

Here are just a few ideas—ones we hope you’ll think about and build on:

- 1.) Even once a week share with your children a good quality (or good memory) about your co-parent.
- 2.) Point out something good they take from the other parent (“Your eyes are as beautiful as Dad’s,” “You write so well—just like Mom”).
- 3.) Let your children know that their other parent cares deeply about them (remember that the world is full of failed spouses who are still very good parents). “Mom/Dad cares about you a lot and has so much to offer you.”
- 4.) Regularly talk about yourself and your co-parent collectively (“Daddy and I were talking and saying how proud we are about your report

card,” “Mom and I are so excited about your making the team,” “Dad and I will take care of that, I can guarantee it.”)

- 5.) Celebrate things the children have done or will do with the other parent (“I think it’s so great that you and Dad are doing Scouts together,” “You’re going to have such a wonderful time with Mom on your trip.”)
- 6.) Regularly encourage your child to call the other parent for a friendly talk on the phone.
- 7.) Remember that just fifteen seconds of decent interaction between parents when children are picked up or dropped off will define how the next week of their lives goes, maybe even what memories they’ll carry forever.

There are many, many more of these you can think of—and each one is a gift to your children as important as shelter. They cost only one thing: Your courage to give them something (1) they need and (2) only you can give.

#### **IV. The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children**

### **Are You Using Your Child as a Dart Board to Hurt the Other Parent?**

- Do you withhold visitations from the other parent?
- Do you use your child to spy on the other parent?
- Do you use your child as a pawn or bargaining chip in fighting over family property?
- Do you use your child as a go-between to resolve issues with your former partner?
- Do you speak negatively and angrily about your former spouse in front of your child?
- Do you compare your child with the other parent in a negative way?
- Do you argue with the other parent in front of the child? -
- Do you use your child to pass on information and messages to the other parent?

Your child feels criticisms of the other parent as if they were criticisms of the child. Each dart thrown at the other parent hits the child first.

The following is a list of destructive remarks that you should not make to your child. If you find yourself saying words like these, stop and think about the impact on your child.

- “If you don’t behave, I’ll send you to live with your father/mother.”
- “You’re lazy/stubborn/bad tempered, just like your mother/father.”
- “I could get along better here by myself.”
- “Sometimes I wish I’d been the one to skip out.”
- “Your mother/father put you up to saying that.”
- “Your dad/mom doesn’t love any of us or he/she wouldn’t have left us.”
- “You can’t trust him/her.”

- “If she/he loved you, she/he would send your support checks on time.”
- “If your mother/father is five minutes late again, you’re just not going with her/him.”
- “If you don’t like what I buy you, ask your father/mother to do better.”
- “Who would you really rather be with, Mommy or Daddy?”
- “Now you are the little woman/little man of the house.”
- “Someday you will leave me to, just like your Mother/Father. Promise that you will never leave me.”
- “You’re all I have. You’re the only person I can rely on.”
- “Over my dead body!”

**ALL OF THESE REMARKS RAISE FEAR AND ANXIETY IN CHILDREN**

## **IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)**

### **How Children React to Divorce/Separation**

We all know that children react to stimuli, whether positive or negative, differently than adults. In addition they react differently based upon their age and gender.

The following categories and descriptions will help you recognize and deal with the various stages of your child's reactions:

#### **Infants and Toddlers: (0-2 years old)**

Reactions:

- Loss of developmental accomplishments: May return to bottle feeding, crawling etc.
- Highly reactive to their environment.
- Very emotional when needs are unmet or schedules change.
- May exhibit frustration by biting, hitting or throwing things.
- May not interact with adult caregivers.
- Lack of interest in exploring their environment.

What to do:

- **PATIENCE, PATIENCE, PATIENCE!**
- Maintain a consistent daily routine.
- Initially keep child care arrangements intact.
- Maintain consistent drop off and pickup times.
- Allow child to take two or three personal items when away from home.
- Keep in mind that long separations from the primary parent may distress the child.
- **REDUCE PARENTAL HOSTILITIES!!**

## IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)

### **Preschool: (3-5 years old)**

Reactions:

- Loss of developmental accomplishments: May return to bottle feeding, bed wetting, baby talk etc.
- Confusion over the cause of the divorce and how it will affect their own life.
- Belief that they are responsible for the divorce.
- Fear of rejection and abandonment and separation anxiety.
- May exhibit anger and aggression towards siblings and other children.
- Temper tantrums and crying may increase.
- More possessive of personal items.
- May have difficulty sleeping.
- May lose interest in activities they once enjoyed.
- May appear withdrawn, joyless and listless.

What to do:

- Frequently reassure your children that they will be taken care of and that you love them.
- Provide opportunities for your child to share his fears and concerns.
- Allow your child to spend meaningful one on one time with each parent as often as possible.
- Initially keep childcare arrangements intact.
- Maintain consistency in activities, routine and discipline.
- Minimize negative and positive changes.
- **REDUCE PARENTAL HOSTILITIES!!**

### **Elementary School age: (6-8 years old)**

Reaction:

- Preoccupation with feelings of sadness, loss, rejection and guilt.
- May cry easily and have a hard time concentrating.
- Decline in school performance.
- Complains of headache, stomachache or other physical ailments.
- Attempts to actively reunite parents.

#### **IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)**

- May assume the role of the absent parent in order to comfort or support the primary parent.
- May show a strong sense of responsibility to take care of their parents.

What to do:

- Allow the child to love both parents; don't ask them to take sides.
- Avoid criticizing the other parent in front of the child.
- Reassure your child that you still love them and will take care of them.
- Let the child know that they will still be able to visit and see both parents.
- Provide a sense of consistency in daily schedules.
- Minimize the number of positive and negative changes.
- **REDUCE PARENTAL HOSTILITIES!!**

#### **Preteens: (9-12 years old)**

Reaction:

- May exhibit sadness, loneliness, insecurity and feelings of helplessness.
- May mask their feelings by trying to act cool.
- May complain of headaches, stomachaches or other physical ailments.
- May take sides and choose one parent over the other.
- May feel and express intense anger.
- May adopt an adult role and same-age friendships may suffer.
- Could see a decline in school performance.
- May engage in stealing, lying and refusing to go to school.
- May prematurely date and become sexually active.

What to Do:

- Talk about the divorce and the changes that will occur.
- Avoid discussing the "legal details".
- Allow the child to express their fears, complaints and concerns to each parent.

#### **IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)**

- Acknowledge your child's anger and feelings and try to change those things that are most upsetting.
- Allow your child to love both parents and do not pressure them into choosing sides.
- **REDUCE PARENTAL HOSTILITIES!!**

#### **Adolescents: (13 years old and up)**

Reactions:

- May become less talkative and may temporarily withdraw to cope with their feelings and emotions.
- May become very volatile or extremely passionate about a subject.
- May use drugs and/or alcohol as a way of escaping their feelings.
- May see a decline or increase in school performance.
- May become preoccupied with a sense of family and may attempt to step into the role of an adult within the family.

What to do:

- Encourage honest and open communication, but avoid the legal details.
- Encourage your child to ask questions and share their concerns about the departed parent.
- Don't rely on the child as a source of emotional support.
- **REDUCE PARENTAL HOSTILITIES!!**

**Remember that although your child may appear to be more physically, mentally and/or emotionally mature than their age, they still do not have the cognitive reasoning skills of an adult. Therefore if we rely on our child for support and comfort we rob them of the ability to experience healing themselves!** SPS/HVCC

**Refrain from using the phrases "Your child" or "My child" as it usually sends the message that they are only accepted by you when they do something good!**

## **IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)**

### **12 Thoughts of Children Caught In Conflict**

- 1. “I’m so ashamed. I’m humiliated. Other kids’ families aren’t like this.”**

“Children believe they are responsible for all of the major occurrences in their lives—including parental fighting.”—Edward Teyber, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992, p. 82.

- 2. “I’m scared. I don’t know what will happen next.”**

“In a home marked by conflict and unpredictability, children do not have a deep and abiding trust in their caretakers.” —Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Intervention with Families in Conflict*. Baltimore: Port City Press, 2000, p.49.

- 3. “I need to fix this. It’s dangerous if I don’t.”**

“Having lost the family as a unit, children are apprehensive about the future. . . . [S]ome youngsters feel they have lost any semblance of control over their lives. . . . Their fear and sense of powerlessness are heightened when children witness scenes in which their parents are at each other’s throats.”—Stanton E. Samenow, *In the Best Interest of the Child: How to Protect Your Child from the Pain of Divorce*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002, pp. 19-21.

- 4. “This is MY mom and dad. I must have the faults they see in each other.”**

“Parental conflict not only sends kids messages about love, marriage, and relationships, it speaks volumes to them about who they are. To a child’s ears, any comment about his parent—positive or negative—is a judgment of him. Any critical barb about your ex goes right to your child’s heart.”—M. Gary Neuman, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House, 1998, p. 202.

#### **IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)**

**5. “I need to figure out who’s right and pick sides.”**

“[C]hildren experiencing intense conflict have to take sides because they can’t manage the internal tension and anxiety they feel.” —Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 20.

**6. “I can’t talk about my real hurt and real fears.”**

“Children also find it difficult to talk about sensitive topics and feelings . . . because they fear they might escalate the fight. . . . Instead, some turn inward, trying to make do with their own meager resources.”—Janet Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Caris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997, pp. xiv-xvii

**7. “I need to tell people what they want to hear.”**

“In the battle between you, they learn to be polished diplomats. They’ll tell each of you what you want most to hear—not because they’re liars but because they want desperately to soothe each of you, to calm you down, to reduce their fears that you’ll become enraged. They’re afraid of your anger, they pity you, and they want you to feel better.”—Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *What About the Kids?* New York: Hyperion, 2003, p. 204.

**8. “I will make one parent angry (or hurt) if I need or love my other parent.”**

“In divorce . . . the choices that are put before children do not lead to a sense of control. Rather, they often lead to the child being placed in a position of feeling like they are betraying one parent or the other (or both).”—Jeffrey Zimmerman and Elizabeth S. Thayer, *Adult Children of Divorce: How to Overcome the Legacy of Your Parents’ Breakup and Enjoy Love, Trust, and Intimacy*. Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2003, p 61.

#### **IV: The Impact of Divorce/Separation on Children (Cont.)**

**9. “If I weren’t here, this wouldn’t be happening.”**

“Because they are often the centerpiece of their parents’ arguments with each other, to varying degrees, these children feel responsible for causing the disputes, yet must feel helpless to control or stop the conflict.”—Janet Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Caris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997

**10. “I can’t do anything right. I deserve whatever bad happens to me.”**

“Children in high-conflict homes are more likely to view themselves . . . in overly negative and hostile ways.” —E. Mark Cummings and Patrick Davies, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994, p.5

**11. “I’d do anything to feel better or to fit in.”**

“Conflicts between parents are likely to cause self-destructive behaviors in children.” —Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 25.

**12. “I don’t care anymore. It hurts too much to care. The world doesn’t care about me—and I don’t care about the world.”**

“Ongoing post-divorce conflict reinforces the child’s belief that bad things will continue to happen to him or her in the future and that he or she is helpless to do anything about it.” —Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Intervention with Families*

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication

Simply put, conflict occurs when two ideas disagree. That is why a person can feel conflicted emotions within themselves, i.e. Should I buy the car or stick with my existing one?

There are commonly 5 stages of conflict resolution that produce great results:

- Identify the problem. This enables you to focus on the actual issue rather than petty differences.
- Express how the problem is impacting you.
- Describe how this makes you feel.
- Resolve the issue or at the least agree that this may not be worth fighting over.
- Follow through using the 3 W's.

Conflict also occurs when you disagree with another person or idea. This is rarely more evident than when it involves decisions which impact your children. Yet being able to communicate in a civil way involves tact.

*Tact has been defined as; "The ability to get your point across without stabbing the other person with your point!"*

In other words we need to be able to communicate in moments of tension without attacking the other person.

**There are typically three ways that we communicate which will trigger conflicts:**

- 1) **Tone of Voice:** Sarcasm, threatening and whining are three tones which push another person's buttons. A tone that commands or demands something may also be a cause for an argument.

## **V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)**

- 2) **Body Language:** Standing with your arms crossed, pointing a finger in the other persons face and getting too close are a few of the ways that body language can cause the other person to become upset or angry.
  
- 3) **Words That Hurt:** Blaming; “This is all your fault,” Accusing; “You’ve always hated me,” Demanding; “Don’t talk to me that way,” and Commanding; “You’re always late...you should be on time when you pick her up” are examples of how words can trigger emotional conflicts.

**When a person pushes our buttons, our tendency is to respond in one of the following three ways:**

- 1) **Defensiveness:** “I am not always late” or “I am a good parent.”
- 2) **Counterattack:** “Maybe I’m not a perfect parent but you’re much worse” or “You think I’m irrational but you’re pathetic!”
- 3) **Withdrawal:** You walk away or hang up on the person. However, there may be times when walking away is appropriate. (Physical violence or feeling threatened.)

**While all three of these responses are convenient none of them aid in establishing communication which will help both parties become more effective co-parents!**

**When planning a meeting with your co-parent, using the “3-W’s” will help ensure effective communication and often prevent the sting of conflict.**

## **V. Conflict Resolution and Communication**

**WHEN?** Choose a time when it is best to talk to your co-parent. Select a time when you are both rested and the children will not overhear the conversation. Limit distractions.

**Where?** Choose a place and/or setting that encourages rational conversation. If you think the conversation may become heated or out of hand choose a public place such as a restaurant. Bars and clubs are usually not the best setting for this type of communication. In addition, oftentimes alcohol does not mix well with rational communications.

**What?** Select “in advance” a topic to discuss. Don’t bring up old events or people. It is a great idea to write down the points you need to discuss and have a copy for both parties. If you get hung up on one item you can table it and move to the next item on the list.

**“Focus on the problem or issues not the other person. In other words separate the issue at hand from the person.”**

Because the potential for conflict is so prevalent, it is important to be able to recognize some **“Feelings” to avoid** when things heat up, as well as some **“Feelings” to embrace** which can facilitate better communication.

The following is a list of “Feeling” words that will help you communicate, whether in times of crisis or calm!

**Post this list somewhere you and your child can see it. Practice using the list to describe how you are feeling at a given time. Encourage your child to do the same.**

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)

### Feeling Words List

#### Pleasant Feelings

Alive, amused, accepted, affectionate,  
Alert, adequate, assured, blest, brave,  
Bold, buoyant, cocky, cheerful,  
Content, caring, calm, casual,  
Confident, capable, competent  
Encouraged, empathetic, expectant  
Excited, energetic, ecstatic  
Fascinated, fortunate, fine, friendly  
Glad, great, good, goofy, gutsy  
Happy, high, hopeful, humble

#### Unpleasant Feelings

Annoyed, afraid, anxious, agitated  
Angry, aggressive, aggravated, abused  
Blue, bitter, betrayed, bored, confused  
Crushed, down, distracted, depressed  
Disappointed, dissatisfied, disgruntled  
Embarrassed, envious, exhausted  
Frightened, frustrated, helpless,  
Hopeless, horrible, hurt, incompetent  
Insecure, ill, infuriated, irritated  
Livid, lost, miffed, mean, nervous

### Speaking WITH the Other Co-Parent

*Avoid setting up communications barriers by using “I” statements instead of “You” statements. “I thought this” rather than “You did this”.*

“I feel like I am the only parent who cares about our daughter’s education” rather than “You never show up for parent teacher conferences.”

“I feel like I have to clean and dress him decent all the time” rather than “Every time you bring him home he looks like he is homeless.”

**“I” statements express how you feel, but “You” statements accuse the other party, and put the individual on the defensive.**

Listen and reflect using the “STP-A” method. Often times when a conflict occurs a person reacts out of anger and emotion. Using the STP-A method helps you be pro-active rather than reactive.

## **V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)**

Remember that while you have no control over how the other person acts or speaks, you do have control over how you act, speak and react!

<b>S</b> top.	<b>W</b> hy
<b>T</b> hink.	<b>A</b> m
<b>P</b> ause.	<b>I</b>
<b>A</b> ct.	<b>T</b> alking?

*“Snap decisions are usually bad decisions”*

**The following are some DO’S and DON’TS to remember when you are approaching what may become a conflict situation:**

### **DO!**

Breathe	Use businesslike skills
Watch your tone	Find something to agree on
Watch your body language	If necessary ask to speak later
Use STP-A	If necessary set limits
Listen to your co-parent	Use self control
Stay child focused	Use facts and observations
Reflect what you heard	Stay focused on the present
Use “I” statements	Address one issue at a time
Use the “3 W’s”	

### **DON’T!**

Respond before you think	Remain stuck in the past
Threaten	Change subjects or distract
Criticize	Use the words Should or Always
Counter attack or blame	Interrogate
Defend	Psychoanalyze
Use sarcasm	Use name calling, labeling or swearing
Demand or command	Ignore or withdraw
Accuse	Focus on winning
Use YOU statements	Dominate the conversation
Use words like always and never	
Pass judgment	

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)

### *Active Listening*

There is a vast difference between hearing something and actually listening.

A friend of mine used to tell his wife ***“I hear you talking, let me know when you are going to actually say something and I will pay attention!”*** You will notice that I said he “used to tell his wife”. It is not surprising that this relationship did not last.

We are so accustomed to the noises around us that we often crave noise for our own peace of mind. It is not unusual to go into an office and hear music playing. Or to the doctor’s office and see Television or a video playing. We even have music playing on the elevator, as if we would stress out between the first and second floors!

People are programmed for noise and as a result we tend to hear a person speaking without actually hearing them. Active listening is the art of intentionally hearing what is being said to you, and letting the speaker know you are truly listening. Active listening is also deferring judgment. Do not plan your rebuttal while you should be active listening!

When you are engaged in active listening you hear the person speaking with your ears as well as with your eyes. You are able to see their body language and sense the emotion with which they are speaking. This enables the active listener to hear more than mere words. The active listener hears the intent behind the words; they hear the entire message.

***Active listening is a skill that with practice can be learned so practice this skill and see your relationships flourish!*** Sam Stovall/HVCC

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)

### **Becoming an Active Listener**

\*\* There are **five key elements** of active listening. They all ensure that you hear the other person and that the other person knows that you are hearing them.

#### **1) Pay Attention:**

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Realize that what is not spoken also speaks loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distractions including distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal.
- Listen to the speaker's body language.
- Refrain from side conversations while listening in a group setting.

#### **2) Show that you are listening:**

Use your own body and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally. (Nodding off is not good!)
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Note your posture and make sure that it is open and inviting.
- Use comments like "Yes" and "Uh-huh" to encourage the speaker to continue speaking.

#### **3) Defer Judgment:**

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish.
- Don't interrupt with counterarguments.
- Don't interrupt to correct what the speaker is saying.

#### **4) Respond appropriately:**

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- Be candid, open and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)

- Treat the other person as he or she would want to be treated.

### **5) Provide feedback:**

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask some questions.

- Reflect what is being said by paraphrasing; “What I hear you saying is...” and “Sounds like you are saying...” are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions to clarify certain points. “What do you mean when you say...” or “is this what you mean?”
- Periodically summarize what the speaker is saying

We have discussed “Active Listening,” now let’s look at three additional parenting/listening styles and see how each differs from “Active Listening”. Role-play each scenario with another person and hear the results.

### **Rescuing: “You poor thing let me fix it for you.”**

*“How was your day?”*

*“Bad.”*

*“Oh, you poor thing. Come and tell me all about it.”*

*“We had this new teacher for math and I couldn’t keep up.”*

*“That’s really awful. Do you want me to help you with your work after dinner?”*

*“I didn’t bring it home.”*

*“Maybe I can call the school tomorrow and talk to the principal.”*

*“Oh, well I don’t know.”*

*“I think it’s best to get to the bottom of things before it gets worse, don’t you?”*

*“Well, umm.”*

*“I don’t want your education to suffer.”*

*“Uh-huh.”*

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)

**Lecturing:** *“You are stupid to have gotten yourself into this mess, now let me tell you what to do. Pay attention.”*

*“How was your day?”*

*“Bad.”*

*“Well you’re a fine one to complain. I wish I could just sit around in a classroom all day!”*

*“Well we had a hard time. We got this stupid new math teacher.”*

*“Hey, don’t go talking about your teacher like that. If you paid more attention you’d be better off. You think you should have everything handed to you on a platter.”*

*“Hmmm.”*

**Distracting:** *“Oh well, forget about it. Let’s go do something.”*

*“How was your day?”*

*“Bad.”*

*“Oh, come on, it couldn’t have been that bad, want something to eat?”*

*“Thanks, but I’m a little worried about math.”*

*“Well, you’re no Einstein, but neither are your mom and dad. Go watch some TV and don’t let it get you down.”*

*“OK.”*

**Active Listening:**

*“How was your day?”*

*“Bad”*

*“You look really upset, what’s wrong?”*

*“We got a new math teacher and he goes too fast.”*

*“Sounds like you’re worried you won’t be able to keep up.”*

*“Yeah, I asked him to explain part of it but he just said I need to pay more attention.”*

*“Hmmm...how did that make you feel?”*

*“Like an idiot! All the other kids laughed at me, but they’re lost too.”*

*“So you’re upset that you got in trouble for speaking up first?”*

*“Yeah, I don’t like getting shown up in front of everyone.”*

*“So what do you think you should do?”*

## V. Conflict Resolution and Communication (Cont.)

*“I guess I could ask him again when the class is over.”*

*“Do you think that would work better?”*

*“Yeah, plus he’s a new teacher so maybe he’s a little nervous too.”*

### **Reflective Listening**

**Reflective listening is quite simply the art of letting people know you hear and understand what they are saying.** During reflective listening you are not trying to solve the other person’s problem, you are clarifying what you believe they said. While reflectively listening you are not saying that you agree or disagree with the person, but simply that you hear them.

#### **Example #1**

Your child says: *“I hate it when Daddy asks me questions about you and your new boyfriend. He wants to know every time you two are together. He also wants to know how much money you spend on me. I don’t know what to tell him. If I answer his questions I feel like a spy and I feel bad. But, if I don’t answer him he gets angry and tries to make me feel sad for him. He even said that I love you more than him! I hate being divorced!”*

Reflect back:

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## **VI. Clarifying Boundaries**

We will now look at establishing “Boundaries” so that you understand your role as co-parents. These Boundaries will help you understand what areas you should be concerned with as well as those which need not concern you. As you re-align your relationship as co-parents it may be difficult to determine what is and is not your business. The following activity may help in clarifying your boundaries:

**Issue:** **My business? Not my business?**

- a. The co- parent got a new job. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. The co-parent is dating. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. You are not sure who is watching your child while the co-parent is out. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. You wonder how late the co-parent is out in the evening. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. You are not sure how the co-parent is spending the child support money. \_\_\_\_\_
- f. The co-parent goes out drinking while the child is with you. \_\_\_\_\_
- g. The co-parent took the children boating without life jackets. \_\_\_\_\_
- h. The co-parent has changed pediatricians. \_\_\_\_\_
- i. The co-parents is going on a vacation without the children. \_\_\_\_\_
- j. The co-parent has someone spending the night while the children are in the home. \_\_\_\_\_
- k. The co-parent arranged summer camp for the children. \_\_\_\_\_

**“When establishing boundaries remember that it is all about your children and how it affects them.”**

## **VII. Raising Resilient Children**

*“The most valuable thing that you can give your child is your unconditional love and your undivided time and attention.”*

<sup>1-</sup>

### **The Seven Guideposts**

Raising Resilient Children by Goldstein & Brooks.  
Copyright c 2002 by Brookes Publishing Co.; Baltimore.

#### **1. Show empathy**

Parents must show empathy or the capacity to put themselves in the shoes of their children and to see the world through their children’s eyes. This does not imply that you have to agree with everything but that you appreciate and validate your children’s point of view.

#### **2. Change negative scripts**

If something you have said or done for a reasonable time is not working, you must change your script if your children are to change theirs. Negative scripts are written over time, but with insight, planning, and effort, they can be rewritten.

#### **3. Use discipline**

Parents most frequently ask about discipline. One of the most important roles as a parent is to be a disciplinarian and to remember that discipline is a teaching process, not a punishment.

#### **4. Problem solve**

Resilient children are able to solve problems. They believe that they are the masters of their own fate. They consider different solutions to their problems, attempt what they judge to be the most appropriate solution, and learn from the outcome.

#### **5. Love your children and help them feel special and appreciated.**

Parents must become charismatic adults in the eyes of their children. You should attempt to spend time alone each day or week with each child.

#### **6. Develop a healthy view of mistakes**

Resilient children view mistakes as opportunities for learning. Children must develop a healthy outlook about mistakes from an early age.

## **VII. Raising Resilient Children (Cont.)**

### **7. Build islands of competence**

Resilient children face their problems, but they also recognize and focus on their strengths. Each child possesses at least one island of competence or area of strength. Parents must focus on this rather than place too much emphasis on children's weaknesses.

### **Tips for Emotional Resiliency**

Judith A. Belmont, MS. (2006) [www.worksiteinsights.com](http://www.worksiteinsights.com) All rights Reserved.

Focus on what you can control, not what's out of your control. Be solution-focused, not problem-focused.

Use events as learning experiences. The Chinese symbol for crisis is made up of the two symbols for danger plus opportunity. Be flexible and open-minded.

Alter your perceptions. Don't try to change others! As Epictetus said in I A.D., "*It is not events which disturb us but our view of those events.*" Enhance rational thinking to prevent negativity from spinning out of control!

Limit the hostility factor. The negativity and anger we harbor for others is more destructive to the one who harbors the resentment. Be generous and giving in spirit and avoid a negative focus.

Strive for GOODNESS, not PERFECTION! Give up the need to be right. Limit defensiveness. Forgive both yourself and others. Accept limitations. Let go of "shoulds" which make one bitter.

Develop compassion. Choose kindness over being right. Resist the need to be critical.

Develop good self-care habits. Allow yourself "mental health breaks" and "time outs" regularly. Take care of needs in mind, body, and spirit. Eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. Pamper yourself. Set limits, prioritize, and delegate when appropriate.

Don't isolate yourself! CONNECT! Avoid self-absorption. Seek to understand, not to only be understood.

## **VII. Raising Resilient Children (Cont.)**

Look for the humor in things. Lighten up! Life is too short to be taken too seriously. Accept that life isn't fair!

Develop mindfulness. Learn to live in the present.

Don't ruminate on events, which can't be changed.

Accept the good as well as bad neither will last forever.

**Child Safety Zone Pledge for Our Children**

*“Children have no defense  
against their parents’ anger. “*

*--Dr. Ross Campbell*

Note: This Child Safety Zone Pledge was conceived with separated parents in mind. But the ideas apply equally to cases involving parents and grandparents.

The Philosophy of a Child Safety Zone:

There are about 10,000 minutes in a week, and on average most children of divorce see their parents together for about 4 of those minutes. This leaves the parents about 9,996 minutes when they can talk about any topic, no matter how difficult or emotional. Is it really selfish for the children to ask that the 4 minutes when they see their parents together be consistently peaceful?

Because these times together are so brief, all parents can give their children the gift of decent interaction during these times.

Our Pledge to Our Children:

We now agree that all times when our children see us together or hear us speaking belong to our children. They make up their Child Safety Zone and are entirely for meeting their needs, including especially their need to see us act as responsible adults in a partnership for them. They are not for conflict or dealing with any difficult issues.

Other children receive this gift from their parents, and our children are no less deserving. From today forward, we each give our children the gift of this Child Safety Zone.

Regardless of what my co-parent does or how I think I’ve been treated, I will always speak and act as a courteous and responsible adult during:

- \* All pick-ups and drop-offs.
- \* All other times our children see us together.
- \* All telephone conversations when our children know we’re speaking.

With this agreement each of us will have the benefit of knowing that our children will be safer and happier—and that we can approach all family encounters confident of a civil time.

Signature and date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature and date \_\_\_\_\_