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### Co-parenting communication

*In order to "normalize" the post-divorce co-parenting situation as much as possible, you need to make all communication clear -- with your children and with your ex-spouse.*

By Jeffrey Cottrill

Generally speaking, when one thinks of the ideal environment for raising children, it's the loving, two-parent model that comes to mind. But in the real world, many parents get divorced and have to continue raising their kids while living in two homes. And while it may be true that you can no longer live with your ex-spouse, this does not reduce the importance of both of you raising your children the best possible way under the circumstances.

Obviously, things are going to be different from now on. Your children need to continue to have stable relationships with both of you -- even while you're living separately. "The relationship has changed from marriage to divorce, so you must make accommodations. You need to clarify explicit boundaries and new rules," says therapist Irene Schatz, Ph.D., who co-runs a co-parenting mediation practice, Collaborative Divorce Consultants, in south Florida. "Some divorced people continue to parent by themselves and end up doing what's called 'parallel parenting,' where the couple has two different schedules and rules." However, this can cause problems when the separate schedules and rules contradict each other. "When there's no collaboration, you're not co-parenting."

Effective parenting after divorce requires effective communication -- both between the co-parents and between the parents and children. Even if they don't like each other, or disagree on many issues, divorced parents still have to work together as a team as far as their children are concerned. In addition, the lines should always be open for the children to express their thoughts and feelings and to be aware of the new rules and boundaries. Everybody should know what's going on. With stronger co-parenting communication, there will be less chance of misunderstandings and conflicts between the ex-spouses -- and a better chance of a healthy upbringing for the children.

### Communicating with your ex

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

Continued open fighting or resentment between co-parents creates a negative, uncomfortable environment for your child and undermines any attempt to forge a stable routine in custody and visitation. It also makes you and your ex poor role models for your child's social and communication skills. Hostility makes co-parents work against, rather than with, each other: sometimes, they use the kids as messengers, or they withhold support or visitation in order to punish the other parent. Rather than being a focused parent who acts for the kids' sake, it's really a way of excusing yourself from your co-parenting responsibilities.

"One of the biggest mistakes is that people end up, under the condition of fear, focusing on things in life they can't control, and that paralyzes their power as parents," says Jeffrey P. Wittman, Ph.D., a family therapist and mediator in Albany, NY and author of *Custody Chaos, Personal Peace: Sharing Custody with an Ex Who Drives You Crazy* (Berkley, 2001). "Every moment a parent spends trying to get the ex to change or act differently is a moment lost with the children."

So put aside your differences and get together on what the new rules, boundaries, and methods are going to be. "You should work hard at sticking to a schedule," says Montreal divorced dad Phil Clavel, the author of *Dad Alone* (Vehicule Press, 2003), a new guide for divorced fathers. "Keep it consistent, so that the kids know there's a routine, as opposed to surprise visits or changes." And keep in touch to make sure

everybody knows what's going on with the routine. "Make sure there's a freedom to phone each other; don't overdo it, but do it for checks and verification. Schedule times; ask each other about activities you should be aware of."

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

Sometimes it may be tempting to blame your co-parent right away when something goes wrong. This may be a result of any ongoing tension you may still have with him or her, as well as your protective instincts for your children. But resist the impulse to overreact and jump to conclusions. Examine the situation first from all sides: maybe it's not as urgent or important as you think. "You have to have faith in the other parent," says Clavel. "You may not have done well as a couple, but as parents, you have to have faith. The ex is not going to be in the house any longer, so develop a trust level. They could be making the right decisions, for all you know. Both parents should be on the same page."

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

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

### Communicating with your kids

Both co-parents and the children must be equally clear about the rules and schedules. Their reactions to the new rules will vary according to their age and temperament: older children may be averse to sudden changes to a family situation they've been accustomed to as long as they remember, while others are too young to understand what's going on and become used to the separate-parents environment as they age. On the other hand, because divorce is more commonplace today than ever before, the kids may be more hip to the situation than you think. Hopefully, you know your children well enough to anticipate their reactions and have a plan for dealing with them.

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

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

The children's best interests should be the first priority -- so be sure you and your ex know what they are. "I would always encourage a parent to sit down and listen to a child," Dr. Schatz advises. Pay attention to what your kids tell you -- both in their words and actions. You'll find out what it is they really want and need from you and your co-parent -- and if there are any problems with the current system.

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

Children should be encouraged to have strong relationships with both parents. But sometimes, it may appear that your child may be favoring the other parent over you. You may think that the other parent is spoiling the child and forcing you into the role of "Bad Cop." Again, don't jump to conclusions. "Remember that children go through different stages and may get along better with one parent at different ages and stages," says Clavel. "The other parent may be more tolerant of certain actions, and some kids will play on that: 'Mom said I could do this.' Once they're told 'no' by both parents, they'll stop it." In these cases, it's not so much a matter of one child getting along better with the other parent -- "it's just 'what's in it for me.'"

"It's very common that one parent gets along better with a child than the other does," says Dr. Schatz. "But if the child knows that the parents are working together, they'll have an equal relationship."

"You're a parent first and a divorced parent second, so don't let the divorce play a significant role in your decision-making," says Clavel. "Make decisions as a mom or dad, not as a divorced mom or dad." No matter how angry or upset you may still be about the divorce, be careful what you say when small ears may be listening. You don't want to give your children the mistaken impression that they were to blame for the breakup ("If only I had cleaned up my room/gotten better grades/didn't get sick on vacation, Mom and Dad would have stayed together").

Your ex is a parent to your child as much as you are -- no matter how much you disagree with him or her. When there's tension between you and your ex, you may want your child to take your side -- which will put an extreme strain on his/her loyalty. It's also dangerous to speak derogatorily about your ex when your kids can hear (even if what you say is true) because that will put your children in a loyalty bind and could make them feel bad about themselves. If you tell them their father's a "no-good bum," your children may end up thinking that they're no-good bums, too: after all, they have to have inherited something from both parents.

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

"One critical problem is that parents get so immersed in their own feelings of hurt and rage that the child gets forgotten," says Dr. Wittman. "When the parents live in different houses, everybody experiences anxiety. It's tragic that people are so hurt that they lose the ability to honor the other parent's role in the child's life. They're so immersed in it that the other person is viewed as an enemy or substantially flawed human being, and that puts the child in a bind. The child goes to the home of somebody who may have been defined as flawed." Your ex may no longer be your spouse, but he or she is your child's parent for life, so don't sabotage that relationship.

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

### Common-sense parenting

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

Good communication among everybody involved -- the parents and the children -- involves both passing on information and paying attention. Always consider the consequences of the messages you get across, intentionally or not, and make sure you're always attuned to everybody else's wants and needs. One way to make sure you don't sabotage your co-parenting relationship is to ask yourself, "What result do I want from this communication?" before opening your mouth. Unless your answer is "To totally burn all my bridges and make sure my ex will never cooperate with me again," you will refrain from being rude, sarcastic, or accusatory when communicating with him/her. Above all, remember that your children's welfare must always be your first priority. Think about the long-term effects on your children of everything you and your ex say and do, and you can create the best possible co-parenting situation.

## Communicating with your kids

There are some "Dos and Don'ts" regarding communicating with your kids.

### Dos:

- Listen. Be aware of any concerns or problems the children may have.
- Encourage them to have a strong relationship with your ex.
- Keep them aware of the parenting routines and schedules.
- Encourage them to talk openly with you about their feelings and thoughts.
- Reassure them that you'll always love them.

### Don'ts:

- Try to manipulate your children into siding with you.
- Badmouth your ex in your kids' earshot.
- Use your kids to spite your ex or as messengers to him or her.
- Make your children feel as if they were to blame for the breakup.
- Put conflict with your ex ahead of the kids' best interests.
- Assume everything's all right with them without making sure first.

## Communicating with your ex

There are some "Dos and Don'ts" regarding communicating with your co-parent.

### Dos:

- Have clear, consistent schedules and rules.
- Keep each other abreast of any parenting-related developments or important issues.
- Schedule appointments to speak with your ex about any problems, then be polite but firm while trying to solve them.
- Develop a trust level between each other -- this means being 100% trustworthy yourself.
- Be civil and reasonable at all times.

### Don'ts:

- Let any conflict with your ex overtake your parenting responsibilities.
- Assume your ex will go along with everything you plan or suggest.
- Jump to conclusions or overreact if you think there's a problem.
- Begin sentences with phrases such as "You always..." or "You never..."