

The Children

- Of the one million children raised in divorce about half are raised in conflict.
- About 60% of these children feel rejected by the divorce.
- Seven factors that influence children's adjustment:
 - Age of children: younger less history so less affected but can be more traumatized by parent's negative behaviors.
 - Gender: girls: teens – boys: preschool age
 - Temperament of the children
 - Environment stability
 - Parental stability
 - Parental access
 - **Co-parenting relationship: THIS IS WHAT PARENTS HAVE THE MOST CONTROL OVER**

The Children

- Children must be shielded from parents' conflict.
- Children must be given permission to love the both parents.
- Children must be able to maintain relationship with both parents without being caught in the middle of parental warfare.
- Parents must be able to realign their relationship from that of Partners to that of Co-parents.
- Parents must successfully cope with the effects of their divorce as they reconstruct their lives apart.


The Children

- Impact of High Conflict on Children:
 - It frightens children
 - It increases anxiety and distress
 - Children often externalize stress symptoms
 - Academic and achievement problems
 - Surreal sense of not existing
 - Places a burden on children development and identity formation
 - Impairs their reality testing
 - Alters the nature of parent-child relationships
 - Threatens the protective nature of parents
 - Child may assume an adult role


The Children

- Factors Providing Children Protection from Conflict:
 - A supportive relationship with at least one parent
 - Presence of siblings
 - Satisfactory adjustment of parents
 - Effective parenting from both parents
 - Increased involvement of noncustodial/previously under-involved parent
 - Type of involvement and activities of noncustodial/previously under-involved parent
 - Sensitive caregivers in the roles of grandparents, teachers, friends and daycare providers
 - Participation in group/individual therapy
 - Compartmentalizing parental conflict

The Parents

- It takes about two years for most people to adjust to their new life.
 - Between 8-10% of divorces become high conflict divorce due to:
 - Relationship impairment
 - Parenting impairment
 - Thinking errors
 - Self-focused perspective
 - Legal endorsement
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The Parents

- Characteristics of High-Conflict Separated Parents
 - **Unable to trust** each other: trust is impaired, expectations are negative
 - Unable to realign as co-parents: stuck in the past
 - Chronic inability to communicate: Don't know how or Don't want to
 - Lack of knowledge to shield children from the conflict
 - Poor reality testing and distorts information
 - Rigid thinking
 - Self-focused
 - Inability to view from other's perspective
 - Denies their contributions to the problem: blames instead of self-reflection
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The Parents

- Characteristics of High-Conflict Separated Parents
 - Extremely sensitive to criticism
 - Remains engaged in conflict: Hostility is attachment
 - Repeats negative stories of relationship
 - Are not accountable for destructive behaviors
 - Differing perceptions of pre and post separation
 - Polarized parenting styles
 - Concerns about the other's parent parenting: their way is the only right way
 - High rates of litigation & re-ligation

Children & Parents

- Motivate and Empower

- Stop parents from thinking of themselves so they can refocus on what they are doing to their children: loyalty bind
- Focus on the children's functioning and present-rearing matters not past marital issues
- Parental interaction can cause children stress (parents negative behaviors) or it can create positive adjustment (appreciation of the parental strengths)
- Reveal and acknowledge secondary gains of the chaos: what does the chaos and confusion provide that parent? Being a victim, viewed a good parent?
- Wake them up: about the harm they can do to their children in the long term
- Cooperative co-parenting is the ideal way to help children cope with the changes in their lives, unlike parallel co-parenting and disengaged co-parenting.

Courts are limited on their knowledge of how parents act together.



Difference between Parenting Coordination and Co-Parenting Counseling

Parenting Coordination:

Co-parents that may benefit: Co-parents who are regularly in front of the Court because they are constantly engaged in high conflict behavior. They are unable or unwilling to make joint parenting decisions, comply with parenting agreements/orders, or shield their child from the impact of the parental conflict. The PC will assist in the implementation of the parenting plan, facilitation of resolutions to child-related disputes, and education about positive co-parenting, with the child's needs at the forefront. This includes establishing a defined communication protocol. Sessions are held once a week, at minimum, but length is unknown due to the nature of high conflict and requires sincere parental involvement.

Co-Parenting Counseling:

Co-parents that may benefit: Co-parents who are stuck on issues related to their unsuccessful relationship, such as lack of trust, unmet expectations, or belief of parenting deficits, which they continue to rehash in their co-parenting roles. Thereby creating obstacles to an effective co-parenting relationship, which can lead to constant confusion and anguish for them, but even more for the child, who gets caught in the middle of it. Co-parenting counseling may be done before PC to help parents gain trust and empathy for each other and to eliminate repeat past conduct or subject matters unrelated to the present or specific to the child.

Co-Parenting Counseling may benefit co-parents that are stuck on issues related to their unsuccessful relationship, such as lack of trust, infidelity, unmet expectations, parenting deficient, which they continue to rehash and repeat in their co-parenting roles. The romantic relationship is over, but the unresolved and unprocessed emotional disputes may be creating obstacles to an effective co-parenting relationship that can lead to constant confusion and anguish for the parents, but even more for the children, who may feel caught in the middle of it.

For some individuals, co-parenting is viewed as a competition instead of a collaboration effort. Competition is based on the need for one parent to be the winner and the other parent to be the loser without putting the child's best interest at the forefront. Collaboration empowers and recognizes both parents in a positive humanizing connection that can be strong and responsive. Co-parenting counseling allows parents the opportunity to address the underlining causes that are hampering productive Parenting Coordination sessions.

The issues to be discusses include:

- Core issues: counseling fosters opportunities for individuals to be vulnerable with each other and creates a safe space to address lingering and damaging concerns so they can have the opportunity to become emotionally healthy co-parents for their children.
- Types of therapeutic interventions: Depends on the core issues of the co-parents but replacing resentment and contempt created by past relationship issues with effective behavioral modification skills and understanding of self to facilitate positive co-parenting interaction to improve the overall well-being of the child is at the forefront of co-parenting counseling.
- Benefits to parent-child relationship: May reduces a child's stress level and provide the child with security and comfort by not being place in the middle of repeated conflict and allows the child to enjoy childhood with minimal disruptions.
- Co-parents that may benefit from co-parenting counseling: co-parents that continue to repeat patterns, such as repeating past conducts or subject matters unrelated to the present or specific to the child.

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EXERCISE

Separation and Divorce Rules

Directions: Post these rules on your refrigerator as a reminder of your commitment to care. Ask your child to let you know if you forget one. Never reprimand them for it.

Dear Mom and Dad, I'm just a kid, so please...

1. Do not talk negatively about my other parent. (This makes me feel torn apart and bad about myself!)
2. Do not talk negatively about my other parent's friends or relatives. (Let me care for someone even if you don't.)
3. Do not talk about the divorce, child support, or other grown-up stuff. (This makes me feel guilty and sick to my stomach. Please leave me out of it!)
4. Do not make me feel bad when I enjoy my time with my other parent. (This makes me afraid to tell you things.)
5. Do not block my visits or keep me from speaking to my other parent. (This makes me very upset.)
6. Do not interrupt my time with my other parent by calling too much or by planning my activities during our time together. (I feel frustrated because my time with both of you is special.)
7. Do not argue in front of me or on the phone where I can hear you. (This upsets me!)
8. Do not ask me to spy for you when I am at my other parent's home. (This makes me feel disloyal and dishonest.)
9. Do not ask me to keep secrets from my other parent. (Secrets make me feel anxious.)
10. Do not ask me questions about my other parent's life or about our time together. (This makes me uncomfortable. So just let me tell you.)
11. Do not give me messages to deliver to my other parent. (I end up feeling anxious about their reaction. So please just call, text, or email them.)
12. Do not blame my other parent for the separation or divorce or for things that go wrong in your life. (This really feels terrible! I end up wanting to defend them. Sometimes it makes me feel sorry for you and I want to protect you. I just want to be a kid, please, don't put me in the middle!)
13. Do not lean on me for your emotional needs or treat me like an adult. (This causes way too much stress for me. Please find a friend or therapist to talk to.)
14. Do not ignore my other parent or sit on opposite sides of the room during my school or sports activities. (This makes me sad and embarrassed. Please act like parents and be friendly, even if it is just for me.)
15. Do not use guilt to pressure me to love you more, and do not ask where I want to live. (I should never have to choose between my parents! I love both of you!)
16. Do let me love both of you and see each of you as much as possible! Be flexible even when it is not part of our regular schedule. (When you don't do this I feel angry and confused.)
17. Do let me take items to my other home as long as I can carry them back and forth. (Otherwise, it seems like you are treating me like a possession.)
18. Do talk to each other weekly so things will go more smoothly for me. (When you don't, I feel confused.)
19. Do help me make or purchase a card for my other parent on special occasions. (Until I am old older, I will forget, and that makes me feel ashamed. Please help.)
20. Do realize that I have two homes, not just one. (It doesn't matter how much time I spend there.)

Thanks,
Your loving child

Children's Typical Reactions to Separation or Divorce

It is important to know what to expect when your child first learns about the separation or divorce. The following are typical reactions that children experience at various ages and stages. Keep in mind that this information is a starting place. You may or may not see these reactions reflected in your child's behavior. You will need to consider the intensity and the duration of these reactions to determine if your child needs the assistance of a therapist to help them cope with the changes.

Infants & Toddlers

Reactions:

- Loss of developmental accomplishments (return to bottle/crawling, waking in the night)
- Highly reactive to their environment
- May become angry when their needs are overlooked or when caretaking schedules are unpredictable
- Clinging to parent and refusing to separate from parent
- Exhibits intense feelings of frustration and anger through biting, hitting, throwing toys
- May not interact with adult caregivers
- Loss of interest in exploring their environment
- Sleep and gastrointestinal problems

What to do:

- Make sure their daily routines are reasonably consistent
- Keep child-care arrangements intact
- Maintain consistent drop-off and pick-up times from day care
- Allow your child to take two or three familiar objects to the day-care setting
- Keep in mind that long separations from the primary parent may be highly distressing for the child
- Reduce parental hostilities

Preschool

Reactions:

- Loss of developmental accomplishments (return to bottle, soiling self, 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
- Fears of rejection and abandonment
- Separation anxiety
- May exhibit anger and aggression toward other children or siblings
- Temper tantrums
- More possessive of personal items
- Frequent crying
- Difficulty sleeping
- Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy
- May appear joyless, listless, and withdrawn.

What to do:

- Frequently reassure your children that they will be taken care of and loved.

- Provide opportunities for your children to share their fears and concerns.
- Allow your children to spend meaningful one-on-one time with each parent as often as possible.
- Keep child-care arrangements intact.
- Provide consistency (daily activities, bedtime routine, discipline, etc.).
- Minimize the number of negative and positive changes.
- Reduce parental hostilities.

Elementary School Age (six to eight)

Reactions:

- Preoccupation with feelings of sadness, loss, rejection, and guilt
- May cry easily, act cranky, and seem anxious
- Increased worry about the future
- Temper tantrums or acting out
- More distractable; difficulty concentrating
- Decline in school performance
- Complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other physical problems
- Attempts to reunite their parents (sometimes by having problems that force parental involvement)
- May assume the role of the absent parent in order to comfort or support the primary parent
- Strong sense of responsibility to take care of their parents

What to do:

- Allow your children to love both parents without pressuring them to side with one parent against the other.
- Avoid criticizing the other parent in front of your children.
- Reassure your children that you still love them and will take care of them.
- Let them know that they will still be able to see both parents.
- Give them opportunities to talk about their feelings.
- Provide a sense of consistency (daily activities, bedtime routines, discipline, etc.).
- Minimize the number of positive and negative changes.
- Reduce parental hostilities.

Preteens (nine to twelve)

Reactions:

- Exhibits sadness, loneliness, insecurity, and feelings of helplessness
- May attempt to undo the divorce
- Feels alone and frightened but acts cool to avoid embarrassment
- Complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other physical problems
- May take sides and choose one parent over the other
- Feels and expresses intense anger
- Strong sense of loyalty; may try to rescue and side with the "wronged" parent
- May adopt an adult role
- Decline in school performance
- Friendships may suffer.
- Acts out by stealing, lying, or refusing to go to school
- May date prematurely and engage in sexual behavior

What to do:

- Talk about the divorce and the changes that will occur, but avoid the legal details.
- Allow your children to express their fears, concerns, and complaints to each parent.
- Acknowledge their anger and attempt to change the things they find most upsetting.
- Allow them to love both parents.
- Do not pressure your children to choose sides.
- Reduce parental hostilities.

Adolescents (12 to 17)**Reactions:**

- Less talkative and more withdrawn
- Exhibits angry and rebellious behavior
- May become sexually active
- May use drugs and alcohol
- Decline in school performance and attendance
- Preoccupation with a sense of family
- May adopt an adult role

What to do:

- Encourage open and honest communication, but avoid legal details.
- Be encouraging with your children.
- Have clear expectations and limits on any inappropriate behavior.
- Avoid relying on your children as a source of emotional support.
- Reduce parental hostilities.

Always

- Encourage open and honest communication between parent and child. Allow your children to express their fears, concerns, and complaints.
- Answer your children's questions honestly and patiently without providing adult information that would cause undue stress for them. If a child asks you a question that is difficult to answer due to its personal nature, respond by saying, "It's okay for you to ask me questions. Sometimes I may not give you an answer because I don't feel comfortable sharing it with you at the time. Please respect my privacy and I will respect yours."
- Reassure your children that they will be taken care of, that you still love them, and that the divorce was not their fault.
- Minimize both positive and negative change. As much as possible, maintain the same residence, school, church, and child-care facilities.
- Help your children maintain contact with extended family and friends.
- Prepare your children for changes before they happen.
- Permit your children to love both parents.
- Provide a stable and secure home by practicing consistent discipline, maintaining rules and limits and consistent daily routines and schedules.
- Be aware that a child at any age may become overly compliant, cooperative, and ideal. This should not be seen as a positive reaction.

Sources

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Dear Mom and Dad,

Thanks for taking the time to help me. Living in two homes is really hard! Sometimes it makes my tummy hurt! I can't always find the words to tell you how I am feeling. Sometimes I act out my feelings without words. When you talk badly about each other, I feel really awful! Sometimes you both get so angry that you forget I am around. I'm really glad that you are going to help me feel better. Thanks!

Your loving but sad child,

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