

CO- PARENTING IN DIVORCE FOR THE CHILDREN'S SAKE
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Most divorcing parents are concerned about the impact of the divorce on their children. In fact, many people either delay or completely forego divorce out of fear of its impact on children. While there is no question that divorce impacts children, divorcing parents can take constructive measures to lessen the impact and to encourage resiliency in their children.

One key time for children is the actual separation of the parents. Parents can lessen the adverse impact by adequately and forthrightly informing the children about what is happening. Many parents mistakenly think that they should keep information from the children. When they ask me if they should tell their children about the marital problems, I reply, "They already know." I go on to explain that the parents are the very center of their children's universe and they are very aware of what is going on in their universe. To try and keep matters from them in hopes of protecting them is probably foolhardy. But, this being said, I recommend parents consult with a child development specialist about how to communicate with children, given their age, gender, attachment to parents and maturity. Chinn & Associates also has some reference materials which will be sent to you upon request.

While we know that children are affected by divorce, we also know that they are resilient. The resilience of the children can be promoted in many ways. First, parents should understand that children rely upon parents for their very survival. This means that children innately see a division among their care givers as life threatening. Parents must speak and act in ways that promote security. This can be achieved by both parents should providing warmth, emotional support, adequate monitoring, discipline, and maintaining age-appropriate expectations. Each parent should make sure that the children have a secure knowledge that each parent is going to be involved in their lives and provide for their survival.

Parents should always remember that children view themselves as coming from both parents and that they may adopt negative feelings about themselves when one of the parents is cast in a negative light. In order to promote resilience of the children and to foster self esteem, parents should work together to promote a healthy viewpoint of each other in the presence of the children.

Recent studies are suggesting that extensive involvement with the Father is tied to better adjustment and performance in school. And, perhaps the biggest factor in child resiliency may be a reduction in parental conflict. In this regard, separation of the parents which leads to less conflict can be a positive factor for the children. In most circumstances, children are better off when their parents parent cooperatively, making decisions together, attending school events together, remaining flexible on visitation issues, and disciplining together.

Cooperative parenting may not be possible at times in the post divorce period. If so, "parallel

parenting” should be tried. Parallel Parenting is a process of parenting next to one another because parents are unable to parent together or co-parent.

Here are some techniques for parallel parenting from “Children’s Adjustment Following Divorce: Risk and Resilience Perspectives” by Joan B. Kelly and Robert E. Emery:

1) Disengagement: Avoid situations or communications which might create conflict.

--Don’t communicate unless you have to. Avoid communication about minor things.

--Don’t tell the former spouse how to parent.

--Avoid criticisms of the other parent’s parenting.

--Avoid conflict in all communications. When your former spouse makes an accusation, don’t “set the record straight.” You will never change their mind. You will only escalate the conflict by replying with your view point.

--Provide basic information only.

2) Communicate by email or letter. When writing to your former spouse:

-- Be factual and concise.

-- Be business-like

-- Avoid sarcasm.

-- Don’t share your communications with the children

-- Don’t ask the children to ask your former spouse something or give your former spouse a request for something. E.g. Ask your father if he wants to see you on this Sunday, or, Ask your father how you are going to be able to participate in the school play if I don’t get your child support.”

--Limit non-emergency information to twice per month (more if child is under age 5).

3) Things to Promote:

-- Ignore (rather than arguing back) when the other parent tries to tell you how to parent.

-- Support different styles of parenting in order to avoid conflict. Even in happy marriages, people differ on parenting. Pick battles very carefully. Most parenting differences are not worth fighting over. E.g., bed times or cleanliness of a room or house.

-- Accept that there is more than one “right way” to parent.

-- Learn to be less rigid and more accepting of the child’s other parent.

-- Don’t try to change how other parent does parenting job.

-- Do best job of parenting during the time child is with you, without criticizing other parent. Children usually resent a parent who criticizes the other parent.

-- Children are capable of being parented in two different styles.

-- Many children of divorce adjust quite well to two very different homes. Some may, in fact, enjoy it, if the parents reduce conflict.

Chinn & Associates strives to handle divorce in way that will lead to long term positive results for our clients and their children. Contact us for more information on how to accomplish this most important objective.