

CO-PARENTING: How Ex-Spouses Turn into Co-Parents and Children Survive Divorce

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Divorce is a complex phenomenon. The family dissolves as it was known. The family loses its emotional constancy as new rules and arrangements for parents and children evolve. Custody arrangements are made but are they compromises for the parents or for the children? Can they work for all?

Too many children seem to fall between the cracks as the parents continue to see themselves as *ex-spouses* rather than as *co-parents*. Co-parenting is a term that follows the idea that even though the parents have dissolved their marital relationship they are parents for life and face the task of guiding their children through infancy, childhood and adolescence hoping to bring them successfully into a full and healthy adulthood.

A symptom of divorce distress is when parents call their lawyers to make parenting decisions instead of being able to make those decisions themselves. When this begins to happen a co-parenting specialist is called for. A co-parenting specialist is a mental health professional who is a psychotherapist with extensive psychotherapy training who does not set out to do therapy though she may have co-parenting meetings while a child is in therapy. She meets with the parents together if possible (or separately if the hostility and conflict is so great that the parents cannot initially sit together in the same room) to sort out custody arrangements and make decisions that bear on their children's lives. The therapist begins to acquaint the parents with the difficult task of finding themselves as ex-spouses but also as co-parents.

Litigation becomes confined to the process of the divorce settlement and the finalization of custody arrangements. When lawyers are advised that a co-parenting specialist is involved they can defer everyday arguments between the co-parents to the specialist and support the co-parenting process. Co-parenting appointments can be set up on a weekly or more frequent basis to start and then progress to an as-needed basis. Lawyers find that they appreciate the chance to just do their jobs and not play the role of therapist that makes them feel frustrated and sometimes helpless. Co-parenting counselors would alleviate litigation, cut legal fees, and change the attorney's role from giving therapeutic advice to giving legal advice, the role they are trained for.

Co-parenting is a cooperative respectful process that requires the ability to differentiate oneself from your children rather than see them as narcissistic extensions of yourself. In the co-parenting literature there is a term, "parent-alienation syndrome." This means that the parent is so enmeshed with his or her child that it is expected

that the child will function as the parent's emissary and companion. This designated child is often given messages from one parent to convey to the other parent. The child often sleeps with the same-sex parent. The result is the child is overburdened with parental concerns and does not live the life of a child. School work and friendships suffer. Often developmental delays result.

Sometimes the messages that are requested aren't true but serve the purpose of retaliation. One mother for example told her seven-year-old daughter to tell her father that she was dating when in fact she wasn't. It wasn't only the lie that was deleterious to the child, but the child was being treated as a peer and as an extension of the mother. The father, in this case, did have a girlfriend who managed to confide her private life to the child. The child's life was being muddled with adult matters. Child therapy was tried on and off until the father eventually did not agree to it. He decided unfortunately that his child did not have problems and was not suffering. He was afraid of changes in his child that would affect how he used the child for his own purposes. Co-parenting was, however, a viable option by a co-parenting specialist who was not intending to do therapy. Clearly, this was a very difficult case and the parents did not agree to meet in the same room. However, the mother agreed to stop her messages and the father took control of his girlfriend's irresponsible outspokenness. The child became less afraid to visit her father as a result and eventually child therapy was agreed to that addressed the sleeping-with-mom problem as well as the discomfort in the father's home.

Each case is different and has its own nuances, but none are easy. Sometimes co-parenting sessions are held while therapy is going on in order to make the therapy continue to be feasible. Mr. Smith and Ms. Brown were divorced for several years and shared the responsibility for two sons. Despite the fact that four years had gone by since the divorce decree the parents remained in litigation about the financial settlement. Despite Mr. Smith's unusual wealth or because of it Ms. Brown couldn't agree to a monetary conclusion to the divorce. The children heard constant acrimonious debate on the telephone or when the children were picked up or dropped off at a parent's home. The younger six-year-old child, Steven, was in therapy with me.

Steven initially played at my dollhouse and called the play family, the "Trouble Family." He identified a mother and father and who argued explosively with each other. I suggested to him that he was playing out his troubles, so that I might fix the problems. He came one day and

played that he was a puppy. He used the couch cushions to build a room and asked for some pretend water and dog food. He told me in his puppy voice that the puppy had no one to take care of him and he was lonely and hungry. The parents' open disputes had clearly taken their toll and Steven felt cast out and alone. In time, he gathered his inner resources and identified with the aggressor continuing to play out his parents' activities and struggles. He played a haughty waiter in an exclusive restaurant. He asked me to play his customer. As his patron, I was given an expensive cuisine to choose from and charged enormous amounts for the meal. I said that he wanted me to understand the life he was living and how money seemed too important to his parents.

In addition to therapy and child guidance sessions, the time for a co-parenting meeting had come. I told the parents I wanted them both to meet with me and that this was not therapy but a meeting about being parents. I laid down strict rules that had to be enforced while the therapy continued. Fortunately, they were both in agreement that therapy was warranted and displayed no resistance to that process and came to the co-parenting session willingly. I told them that a driver could no longer bring their son to treatment. I explained that I expected them to drive him to therapy and wait in the waiting room ready to greet Steven when he came out of my office. I explained that there was to be no more arguments in front of Steven and strongly recommended they complete their litigation, so they could stop being ex-spouses that bound them together and could start being the co-parents that Steven was asking for. I suggested that less emphasis be on expensive dinners and clothes and more time spent talking and playing with Steven. I felt that despite their tremendous resources that Steven was lonely and bereft of their company and good wishes. I suggested that they set a time once a week to discuss Steven's activities and plans for the week and any distress he was feeling. This was to be only a half hour and not a time for discussions about litigation. They listened attentively and began to follow my rules. Steven became a better student in school, made friends, and shared his feelings with each parent. The co-parenting interlude strengthened the therapy process.

As can be seen from these very different and difficult cases, co-parenting is a flexible process that includes both parents in a cooperative effort to support their children as they move through the divorce process. The transition from ex-spouse to co-parent is a trying one that requires a great deal of resilience from the specialist.

While results are not miraculous, they take the burden off the matrimonial attorney and offer a cooperative solution to the parents. The children are chosen as the priority. Decisions are made in their interest and in a reasonable amount of time. Instead of seeing the other parent as the problem, the parents learn to face what is needed for their children. They learn to compromise as they face that their persisting marital problems create severe disappointment and conflict for their children. Successful co-parenting reduces hostility and brings forward recognition that the children need two parents.

