



Co-Parenting: Taking the High Road after Divorce

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Divorce forces you to continue a relationship with your co-parent, no matter how difficult. Working with a co-parent who may not share similar values regarding parenting, shared time or what details to share with the children can be challenging. Navigating through the critical voicemails and text messages, threats to fight for custody, information being withheld, what feels like a competition between the households and your child being told too much information can be overwhelming. These situations can be incredibly stressful and the buildup of stress can be harmful to parents, leaving their children caught in the crossfire. As a natural defense to this stress, many parents are quick to blame their co-parent for the challenges in the relationship without seriously considering the things they can personally change to make things better.



Why Do Co-Parents Fight?

Constance Ahrons coined the term 'fiery foes' as co-parents who are so distracted by high levels of anger, they are unable to make decisions together when it comes to arrangements for their children. These parents tend to need a lot of outside help from others while they are consumed with hurt feelings and anger. The lack of control in one's own life makes them create situations, or further arguments, in which they attempt to gain control or get revenge. This way of relating to their co-parent becomes a habit, a part of how they interact. The anger then serves a function, helping create a boundary that keeps the co-parent at arm's length. With these walls up, the drama and memory of the marriage, and pain experienced with their co-parent, prevents them from keeping the focus on their children.

How Fiery Foes Keep the Fire Burning

The co-parent who starts the fire and continues to fuel it is likely to engage in custody fights by nitpicking every detail and also in over-sharing what children need to know about the divorce. This constant jabbing leads to further badmouthing of the other co-parent and criticism of their parenting abilities. So, how do you co-exist and co-parent with these difficulties, and how do you take the "high road" after divorce?

Shift Focus to the Children

What is required to keep focused on the children, when your co-parent is focusing on him or herself? To be a parent, you need to take care of yourself while taking care of your children. Taking attention away from your children to fight back against your co-parent feeds the process and keeps the fires burning. Defending yourself, or smearing the other parent takes away from you and your children. Take time to identify the negative interactions; think about how it affects your children, your relationship with your children and your co-parent. It is key to keep in mind what is truly in the children's best interest.

How to Take the High Road

Be patient with yourself. You are a human being; there is no perfect way to communicate. Reducing the distress you feel and your children perceive, is the overall goal.

To start, take responsibility only for your behavior. Stop making excuses and stop denying the severity of the situation. Reduce exposure to situations that trigger an equally reactive response to your co-parent.

Set personal limits. Physical limits create distance between you and your co-parent, whether these are boundaries for pick-ups/drop offs, sitting separately at children's

extracurricular events or school meetings or avoiding places where you may run into your co-parent. Emotional limits refer to how reactive you are to stress and helps define who you are to your co-parent, your children and others in your life. There is security with boundaries. For example, time is a boundary that can be beneficial to set; being consistently late to fight back with your forever-late co-parent only fuels the fire. Your co-parent may not like boundaries you set; you are not responsible for how they feel when you set boundaries, as these define what is acceptable to you. If pick up is at 5:00 p.m., respect that time and he/she will be forced to as well. You may need to say “no” to maintain a boundary. Clarity in the divorce decree and custody arrangement helps clear up any questions regarding the rules set by the court.

Stick to the schedule respectfully. Only communicate when necessary.

When you say to yourself, “Oh here we go again...s/he’s not listening or respecting my boundaries...,” re-check your expectations. Remember to be realistic. Expectations need to be true-to-life; who your co-parent is and what they chose to do is not your decision. Focus on what is needed for the children and that’s it. Do not engage in the game of boundary pushing or trying to get them to change. You and your co-parent must work together no matter how difficult. The less combative you are with him/her, the more you can focus on just parenting. You both are the parents for your children no matter the complicated nature of the relationship.

When the Gate Seems Closed, Try to Open it

Stop playing into the games; call a truce. You cannot control what the other parent does, but you can control how you react. When a co-parent tosses a ‘grenade’ into the relationship, do not pick it up. In other words, recognize that this may be the co-parent baiting you to react so they will trap you and gain control. Instead, take time to respond, and only respond to the details that really need to be addressed. Consider offering your co-parent to take time with the child, be nice at all times and aim to be the best person you can be, despite the difficulties in communicating. Start conversations that honor and recognize your co-parents’ relationship with their children and attempt to convey a pure intent for all parties to win (both parents and the children).

Effective Communication with Co-Parent

Proactive Solutions

- Stay focused on your message
- Be aware of your own reactions—both what you say and your body language
 - ◆ Speak calmly, clearly and confidently
- Avoid responding to attacks and manipulation
 - ◆ Simply focus on the goal or task regarding the children, and accept responsibility for any miscommunication. There is no need to respond to attacks or criticism or engage in a debate
- Cut off emotionally (protect your own heart)
 - ◆ Let the emotions subside before reacting

Practical Solutions for Staying out of the Game

- Keep e-mails short (don’t fall into trap of baiting); use “yes/no”
 - ◆ Conversations can easily turn into debate
- Ask yourself, “What’s the worst that can happen if you don’t reply immediately?”
 - ◆ Take a break before you engage, get feedback from another person before responding
 - ◆ Respond with “Good question. I’m not sure right now. I’ll let you know tomorrow by 5:00 p.m.” and then take the extra time to respond
- You are in business with your co-parent with the common goal of doing what is in the best interest of your children
- Doing the same thing and expecting different results is insanity – time to try something new
- Doing nothing is not always helpful to set boundaries in the future
 - ◆ Make the effort to set up clear boundaries with teachers, coaches, mutual friends and others
- Talk to your children’s teachers about the need for information to be sent to both parents
- Know that this is all temporary and rules will change as children get older
- Don’t let negative emotions run your life. Get help from those that support you. Don’t use your children for support. Listen, vent, reach out for help and seek wise counsel
- Following the advice of your closest friends or family may not be the best option; their advice may inadvertently keep you in the fight (remember your goal is to stop playing the game)

Benefits of Not Playing the Game

- Children Win = Parents Win
- Limits distraction
 - ◆ Prevents you from becoming preoccupied and so concerned with the hurt and games that it inhibits your ability to fully be present with your children
- Creates consistency for your children - which strengthens your relationship with them

Remember

- Divorce creates the opportunity to start a new life with newly defined relationships
- Keep in mind that your children live in two different worlds—one with each parent
 - ◆ This process is difficult, and adapting to the new world can be more challenging when parents are busy fighting for control

- There are services available to help you have a voice in your co-parenting relationship
 - ◆ Mediation can help clarify your desires for your children and aim for a place for you and your co-parent to come to an agreement. Involving lawyers in the process may be necessary.
- Minimize the negative effects on the children
 - ◆ Children need time to adjust and so do YOU
 - ◆ Accept that your child needs, and has a right to, BOTH PARENTS in order to have a healthy relationship
 - ◆ There is no room for alienation - don't make derogatory statements about your co-parent or tell your child too much information in order to gain control over the child and other parent. Sabotaging the other parent's relationship with their children hurts your children in the end
 - ◆ Remember—what your co-parent does is their responsibility, what you do is your responsibility
 - ◆ Don't confuse your child or make them grow up too fast by exposing them to adult problems. That puts them in the middle of you and your co-parent's problems

You can do this! It may take time, but it's critical to learn new ways to keep the peace and manage the stress. Many parents need assistance in working towards this goal; mental

health professionals, members of the clergy and support groups are a great place to begin. Co-parenting programs such as the Co-Parenting for Resilience program offered through the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (www.co-parenting.okstate.edu) is a great place to begin to learn solid skills for how to keep the focus on the children. Mediation services are good resources as well. They aim to hear the voices of both parents in order to come to a mutual agreement on how to best co-parent (see Early Settlement Mediation Programs at <http://www.oscn.net/static/adr/documents/ADRSDirectory.pdf>)

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The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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