

Co-Parenting After Divorce

By *Sam Margulies*

Created Mar 18 2009 - 8:02am



Co-parenting after divorce has become an increasingly attractive and sought after arrangement. In contrast to the conventional sole custody in which the mother typically has all the responsibility for the children, co-parenting emphasizes an equal (or nearly equal) role for fathers.

Co-parenting fathers have the children with them for more overnights and play a larger role in the many tasks associated with parenting, tasks such as clothes shopping, extra curricular activities and homework. Today, the majority of mothers are employed full time and the simple logistics of two career couples require co-parenting. It is too exhausting to have a full time job as well as all the responsibility for raising the children. So divorcing couples are moving to co-parenting out of simple necessity and the need to survive.

But recognizing that co-parenting is desirable is not the same thing as making it successful. For co-parenting to work couples have to proceed through the divorce without the destructive adversarial struggle that characterizes so much of conventional divorce. If you want to succeed at co parenting, the "co" has to mean cooperation from the beginning. A couple who conduct an adversarial divorce and then try to have equal parenting will find themselves doing parallel parenting rather than co parenting. For this reason I strongly recommend that couples who seek a shared and cooperative parenting arrangement seek mediation rather than conventional adversarial divorce.

There are six keys to making co-parenting work.

1. Residential Proximity

The most effective co parenting usually involves parents that live close to each other. Although it is possible to make it work living far apart it is not likely. The co parenting relationship suffers from the fact that the children's friends and activities usually center on one neighborhood and the need to drive them back and forth frequently soon taxes everyone's patience. I usually urge parents to reside within the children's social orbit and have found over the years that this works best.

2. Economic Parity

Great economic disparity between the two households almost always causes problems. Rich house/poor house is quickly communicated to the children with inevitable resentment as a consequence. Co-parenting is actually more expensive because it requires two

complete homes for the kids. Unfortunately, child support guidelines penalize mothers who agree to such arrangements by reducing already inadequate support. For people who want to make co parenting work child support guidelines are a poor standard. I encourage couples to determine support levels pragmatically by careful review of budgets so that both households are adequately funded.

3. Intelligent scheduling

Parenting schedules should be designed to meet the needs of all family members. Parents need time to be with their children. They also need time away from their children to rest and build new social lives. Children need time with both parents but also need reasonable stability. So schedules must address all of those needs. For full shared parenting the best schedule for most families includes alternate weekends from Friday evening to Monday morning. This leaves the weeknights. I recommend that one parent take Monday and Tuesday nights and the other take Wednesday and Thursday nights. This schedule minimizes the number of back and forths for the children and provides for plenty of time with each parent. Of course, parents need to accommodate each other when scheduling conflicts require changing the schedule. But schedules should be adhered to as a general principle.

4. Acceptance of Different Styles

It would be unusual for two parents to have exactly the same parenting styles. People have legitimate differences around issues of bedtimes, food, TV, discipline and risk tolerance. Cooperative parenting requires that each parent resist the temptation to criticize the other parent's parenting unless there is a serious danger to the child. The cost of the criticism and the predictable defense and counter criticism usually exceeds by far whatever benefits are sought in the first place. Children need their parents to be at peace so biting one's tongue may be a vitally important behavior.

5. Acceptance of each other's new mates.

Most divorcing people remarry. How well the new mate is integrated into the family is frequently determined by the attitude of the children and the attitude of the former spouse. Each parent should encourage the children to like and respect the new stepparent. If children are not comfortable in each home, co-parenting fails. If children are encouraged to challenge the new stepparent co-parenting also fails. Although it may be understandable that the ex feels pangs of jealousy about the new mate of his/her former spouse, those feelings must be managed and not shared with the children.

6. Effective conflict resolution

Divorce involves continual change. New residences, new jobs, new mates, new schedules and the changes that come from children getting older must all be managed. The ability of the co parenting arrangement to adapt to change is influenced by the ability of the parents to resolve occasional conflicts effectively and without rancor. I encourage parents to have a mediation clause in their separation agreement so they can go quickly to a mediator when a dispute arises that they cannot resolve easily between themselves. This often provides the difference between long term success and a failed co-parenting arrangement.

Links:

- [1] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/taxonomy/term/5>
- [2] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/children-co>
- [3] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/children-divorce>
- [4] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/couples>
- [5] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/effective-parenting>
- [6] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/extra-curricular-activities>
- [7] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/full-time-job>
- [8] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/homework>
- [9] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/logistics>
- [10] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/mediation>
- [11] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/orbit>
- [12] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/parenting>
- [13] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/patience>
- [14] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/proximity>