

# divorce matters

## Talking with your child's other parent

When two people divorce, their relationship as spouses ends. But because the parent-child relationship continues, they need to develop ways to handle new parenting responsibilities. Ideally, they can work as a parenting team while keeping their personal lives separate.

This type of relationship is generally ideal, but there are exceptions. In some situations children need protection from a parent. Examples include when a parent has abused, neglected, or deserted a child. Continuing a relationship with this parent isn't in the child's best interest.

In most families, however, it works best if both parents cooperate. Children adjust more quickly and have fewer long-term problems when they maintain close, independent, and supportive relationships with both parents. When parents cooperate, it makes for a better adjustment for the children.

### Relationships between former spouses

Relationships between former spouses can be grouped into five categories.<sup>1</sup> The first two are fairly positive; both parents continue to have relationships with their children, and the disruption of a separa-

#### Tips for open communication

- Discuss issues in neutral locations.
- Use common courtesy.
- Set discussion goals and stick to the topic.
- Start with neutral facts.
- Share your child's point of view.
- State your opinions or feelings.
- Ask for more information or time to consider issues.
- Identify areas of agreement and potential conflict.
- Prepare to negotiate.
- Take a break if needed.

tion or divorce is minimized. In the last three categories, lack of support and cooperation between parents causes problems for both the children and adults.

#### Perfect pals

Perfect pals are former spouses who remain friends after a separation or divorce. The decision to divorce is usually mutual, but perfect pals still like

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<sup>1</sup>Ahrons, Constance & Roy H. Rodgers. 1989. *Divorced Families: Meeting the Challenge of Divorce and Remarriage*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

and respect each other, which helps them cooperate. They do not allow anger or hurt feelings to interfere with their parenting.

With a common concern for their children's welfare, perfect pals share decision-making and child-rearing. Both participate in family events such as birthdays and teacher conferences.

Custody is usually shared, and arrangements are flexible. Perfect pals help each other in times of need such as caring for sick children or dealing with adolescent problems. This type of relationship, while rare, makes a child's adjustment to separation or divorce relatively easy.

### **Cooperative colleagues**

Cooperative colleagues aren't necessarily friends, but they can cooperate and make compromises for the sake of their children. Although they may disagree over issues such as finances and child rearing, they keep their conflicts under control. Custody and visitation arrangements are more formal, but they are flexible enough to meet changing needs. There is some sharing of decision-making and child-rearing tasks, and some participation in major life events.

Cooperative colleagues help each other in times of crisis. They understand and accept their parental responsibilities. Their priority is to do what is best for their children. This cooperative co-parenting, which allows children to maintain both relationships, helps reduce the stress of separation or divorce for children.

Though there may be conflict in the perfect pal and cooperative colleague relationships, it is managed effectively. In the next three categories, conflict is not managed well. This leads to negative relationships that create difficulty for everyone.

### **Angry associates**

These are former spouses who allow their built-up anger to affect their current relationship. They are barely able to co-parent; the process is strained and difficult. They often end up arguing. There is little flexibility in their arrangements, and negotiating them brings up old pain.

One parent usually has custody. There are power struggles over visitation and child support. The children are in the middle and feel competing tugs at their loyalties. Events such as birthdays and graduations may be stressful. Other family members may be drawn into the conflicts. Angry associates may not help each other in times of crisis or stress. Children suffer much more from the effects of separation or divorce when their parents have this kind of relationship.

### **Fiery foes**

Fiery foes are so angry with each other that they cannot co-parent. Each feels the other is an enemy and focuses on perceived wrongs. The anger never dies. Custody negotiations are a battle; support payments and visitation become weapons.

The power struggle affects the whole family. Children become pawns in the conflict and are often forced to take sides. Major events such as birthdays and weddings become opportunities to resume battle. One parent may be ex-

cluded from such events to avoid conflict. No help is expected from the other parent in times of stress or crisis. One parent, usually the father, gradually withdraws from seeing the children. This kind of relationship is extremely hard on children.

### **Dissolved duos**

These are former spouses who discontinue contact after the separation or divorce. One parent, usually the father, may move from the area, completely withdrawing from the former life.

As you adjust to your new circumstances, consider the choices you can make in establishing a new relationship with your former spouse. Which one of these patterns seems best for you and your children?

### **Open communication lines**

It's important for you to continue communicating with your former spouse no matter how angry you are. Open communication will help ensure that good decisions are made for your children.

Both parents want their views heard. Following are some techniques you can use to help keep your conversations with your former spouse constructive and productive.

### **Preparation**

- Remind yourself that the conversation is in your children's best interest. This is not an opportunity to seek revenge.
- Clearly understand the issue and what you feel the best solution is.

- Consider other options, especially those your former spouse might endorse.
- Think about what is negotiable and what isn't.
- Make sure you are considering your children's best interest rather than your own.

### **Conversation**

- Use neutral, factual language.
- Make statements that explain your feelings, "I feel...." Avoid statements that accuse, "You always...."
- Explain your views clearly. Don't expect your former spouse to read your mind.
- Ask your former spouse to explain what he or she is thinking. Don't assume you can read his or her mind.
- Be willing to compromise when possible.

### **Sample dialogue**

- Find a neutral location if you are meeting to discuss an issue.  
*"John, I'd like to meet with you at Friendly's Restaurant next Thursday evening to talk about Sally. Is that OK with you?"*
- Pick a time to have a phone conversation that is convenient for both of you and when your children cannot overhear.  
*"Elaine, I need to talk with you about Sally. I know she's at school now, and I wonder if this is a good time for a private talk?"*
- Use common courtesy.  
*"Thanks for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice."*
- Set a goal to introduce the topic.  
*"I'd like to talk with you about Sally's summer plans."*
- Start with neutral facts.

*“Sally’s school vacation will run from June 20 until August 25 this year.”*

- Share the child’s views with the other parent if appropriate.

*“Sally says she’d like to go to 4-H camp this summer.”*

- State your opinion or feelings about the issue.

*“I think it’s a good idea.”*

- Ask whether the other parent needs more information or time to consider the issue.

*“I’d like to know what you think of this plan. Would you like to look over the camp brochure and take some time to think about it?”*

- Identify areas of agreement and areas of potential conflict.

*“I’m glad you agree that camp would be good for Sally, but we need to discuss who will pay for it.”*

- Prepare to negotiate.

*“Sally can contribute some of her babysitting money, and I can afford half of the remaining fee. Can you pay the other half?”*

- Stick to the topic at hand. Don’t bring up unresolved issues.

*“I recognize that you’re still angry about my running up credit card bills last year, but that has nothing to do with Sally’s summer plans. Let’s please try to stick to that subject.”*

- Take a break if you feel an argument beginning. Schedule another meeting if necessary to conclude the discussion.

*“We both seem to be getting angry about the money issue. Let’s take a break now, think things over, and discuss the matter again on Friday. Is that OK with you?”*

## References

Wallerstein, Judith S. and Joan Berlin Kelly. 1980. *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce*. Basic Books.

Wallerstein, Judith S. and Sandra Blakeslee. 1990. *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children A Decade After Divorce - Who Wins, Who Loses - and Why*. Ticknor & Fields, N.Y.

### Be sure to read more publications in the “Divorce Matters” series:

- Talking with children (PM-1638)
- Visitation dos and don’ts (PM-1641)
- Coping with stress and change (PM-1637)
- A child’s view (PM-1639)
- Talking with your child’s other parent (PM-1640)

Contact the Iowa State University Extension office in your county for more information about children and families.

### Family Life 3

Originally developed as *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting* by M. Mulroy, R. Sabatelli, C. Malley, and R. Waldron (1995), University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension. Adapted with permission for use in Iowa by Lesia Oesterreich, ISU Extension family life specialist.

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