

After the Divorce: Treating Co-parenting as a Business Deal

Going through a divorce may be one of the most stressful situations a person may experience; this holds true for both the adults and children involved. Although the marriage is over, the relationship is not. Just as newly married couples have to learn how to be married, newly divorced couples have to learn how to be divorced. It may be useful for some divorced parents to learn to treat each other as business associates. In good business deals, people must treat each other in a matter-of-fact fashion. The parties do not have to like each other, but treating each other with disrespect will likely ruin the deal.

The best business deals, as well as co-parenting arrangements, are win-win for both parties. In co-parenting, the “deal” is working toward the happiness and well-being of the children. Arrangements that allow one parent to win while the other parent loses will ultimately ruin the deal and likely harm the children. Children benefit from the involvement of both parents in their lives. This Tip Sheet provides techniques for MRE practitioners on helping parents adjust to and manage this new working relationship.

Define the Relationship. Divorced parents have a romantic history. By discussing new roles and expectations as co-parents, they will redefine their relationship. The “business associates” model may be difficult to adjust to, but it does imply respect and a mutual goal.

Manage the Negatives. It is understandable that divorced parents may have trouble managing their emotions, especially immediately after the divorce.



When people are upset, they tend to say negative things just to win an argument or to hurt the other person. It takes at least five positive comments to offset one negative comment. Remind parents that every time they let a negative comment slip, they will have to work that much harder to reach the goal of a workable co-parenting relationship. It is also pointless to bring up past arguments that were relative to the marriage. Teach co-parents to focus only on the situation at hand.

Learn When to Take a Time-out. Parents who have difficulty communicating without fighting most likely have not learned the signs that a conversation is getting out of control. Share with parents how to recognize when they are withdrawing, interpreting remarks negatively, or putting one another down or if the conversation is getting heated. When a conversation is becoming emotionally charged, it is time to take a time-out. It is better to let each person calm down than to risk saying something that will only make things worse. During the time-out, ask parents to focus on the

objective and the best way to get there for the good of the children. Remember to set a time to call “time-in” so that the negotiations can continue.

Solve Problems Effectively. Parents who have divorced may not have learned how to solve problems as a team. A first step to problem solving is talking about the problem without insulting or dismissing the other. Teach parents to discuss the problem without trying to solve it right away.

To problem solve, the following tips are helpful:

- Utilize effective listening to ensure both parties have a chance to voice their concerns and be heard without interruption.
- Create a clear definition of the problem and address one piece at a time.
- Brainstorm possible solutions; all ideas are valid.
- Discuss the pros and cons of each idea, and work toward a compromise.
- Write the solution down, and agree to try it for a set period of time. At the end of the trial period, come together to discuss the solution and tweak if necessary.
- Some problems will not have a solution. In this case, keep the focus on how the parents are going to protect their children from further emotional distress.

Meet Regularly. All groups that work together toward a common goal need to have regular meetings to check progress, problem solve, and make sure that everyone is on the same page. Divorced parents also need to have regular meetings. These meetings can prove to be tricky if they have not yet learned to be civil with one another.

Several suggestions might help parents establish and maintain these meetings:

- Meet in a public place where the children are not present.
- Topics should focus on issues involving the children.
- Keep notes from the meeting. Have each parent approve the notes for accuracy and sign them before leaving. Remind parents that they are not nurturing a friendship but a business deal, characterized by a contract to which both parties agree.
- Be flexible, honest, matter-of-fact and transparent. If things get heated, end the meeting and agree to come back together at a later date for further discussion.

Create a Workable Co-Parenting Plan. Co-parenting relationships need to establish a workable contract that promotes the involvement of both parents with the children. This includes careful consideration of how to exchange important information about the children such as medical records, grades, school activities and performances, vacation times, visitations, etc. It also involves difficult conversations about access, custody, and financial support. The court will establish boundaries, but parents need to work together in the best interest of their children. Remind parents to discuss challenges about the plan at a scheduled time, not in front of the children.

Divorce is a traumatic experience for everyone involved, but it can be especially damaging to the children. Parents must manage their new relationship as if it were a business arrangement to ensure the well-being of the children. Skills

essential to success include learning new communication strategies and behaviors that do not put the children in the middle; promoting a civil relationship by managing the negatives; recognizing danger signs; taking a time-out; and effective problem solving.

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