

Parenting: Success Requires a Team Effort

Parents are faced with decisions every day about how to raise their children. Some decisions are minor, such as whether children can have snacks before dinner. Others are major, such as which school a child attends. Sometimes parents agree on these matters, and sometimes they disagree. How parents negotiate different child-rearing beliefs and day-to-day shared parenting responsibilities is called co-parenting.

Co-parents might live in the same household or in separate households. Regardless of where co-parents live, or if they are married, research suggests that the co-parenting relationship plays an important role in children's lives. The extent to which children experience their parents as partners or opponents in parenting is related to children's adjustment and well-being.

The study of co-parenting grew out of research done on marriage, parenting and child development. In general, studies showed that children who were getting along with others, doing well in school and feeling good about themselves lived in families with satisfied spouses and effective parents. Children who were not doing as well lived in households with less satisfied spouses and less effective parents. A closer look at these families revealed that spouses who were not getting along often allowed their marital problems to interfere with their effectiveness as parents.

Unhappy marriages and unsupportive co-parenting go hand-in-hand. And unsupportive co-parenting results in children who didn't feel good about themselves or get along well with others. Research shows these connections between marriage, co-parenting and child development hold true in both divorced and non-divorced families.

Supportive co-parenting

Supportive co-parenting takes place when parents agree on parenting decisions. These decisions range from the routine, such as agreeing to a bedtime, to the philosophical, such as determining what is best for the child.

FOCUS on Kids

This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children.

We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.

Children experience supportive co-parenting when they receive the same message from both parents and observe their parents supporting each other. You can find opportunities to practice supportive co-parenting every day. For example:

Two-year-old Adam touches the dishes in the dishwasher. His parents quickly tell him, "No, no, stay away from the dishwasher."

In this example, Adam receives the same message from both parents. He is told that he should stay away from the dishwasher. When children hear the same message from both parents, they are more likely to listen and cooperate.

Eighteen-month-old Spencer stands by the door, waiting to go outside. Mom tells Spencer he can't go out because he isn't wearing his outside clothes. Spencer then looks at his dad, who replies with, "You heard what your mother said."

In this situation, the child receives the same message from both parents.

Parents who do not live in the same household also have many opportunities to support each other's parenting decisions. For example:

Marcia (13 years old) lied to her mother about a test grade. Because of the lie, Marcia's mom told her that she could not see her friends over the weekend. However, Marcia was to spend the weekend at her dad's house. After hearing about the lying incident, Marcia's father agreed that she shouldn't see her friends over the weekend.

Marcia's parents agreed the lie was serious and required follow-through, so she received the same message from both parents.

Reviewed by
David Schramm, State Specialist, Human Development and Family Science

Supportive co-parenting is important for a child's well-being. Children can feel better about themselves when they do not have to worry about their parents. Children need to experience a strong and cooperative relationship between their parents. Research shows that children do best when parental figures can get along with each other and handle disagreements positively. Mothers and fathers who agree about most parenting issues and who frequently support each other create an environment that allows children to be children. Children have the opportunity to focus on what matters to them, such as school, friends and activities, not their parents' disagreements.

Unsupportive co-parenting

Unsupportive co-parenting occurs when mothers and fathers disagree about parenting issues. These can be minor disagreements, such as one parent letting a child watch TV before doing homework and the other parent wanting the child to do homework first. These issues can also be about child-rearing beliefs. Some parents might argue about discipline, with one parent believing in physical punishment and the other believing in reasoning and discussion. These arguments can become negative and hostile if parents are unable to resolve their differences.

Children experience unsupportive co-parenting when they hear different messages from their parents and observe parents arguing about issues related to them. For example:

Nine-year-old Tashel comes into the kitchen to ask her parents if she can play with her friend. Mom immediately says it's okay, but Dad tells Tashel to stay home and finish cleaning her room.

In this example, Tashel receives different messages from her parents. What should she do? Who should she listen to? This is a confusing situation that can cause a child to feel guilty for having to choose which parent to listen to, anxious about their parents fighting and being caught in the middle of a no-win situation.

Repeated experiences of unsupportive co-parenting can be harmful for children. Research shows that children who witness co-parenting disagreements feel bad about themselves and experience guilt, stress and anxiety. Poor co-parenting relationships weaken the parental partnership, and might cause children to worry about their parents' relationship. Parental disagreements and arguments about childrearing create a no-win situation for children. They don't know which parent to listen to, are unsure of how to behave, and feel responsible for their parents' problems.

Children are especially affected by unsupportive co-parenting that includes negative emotions. When one parent expresses sarcasm or disapproval of the other, children feel the sting of these exchanges. For example:

One 13-year-old boy, whose parents are divorced, said this about his parents' fighting: "They have fought because

they want me the same week or something — it's not working. My dad has gotten really angry at mom and, yeah, when your parents fight, you don't feel good at all because you feel like you had something to do with it and they're fighting over you."

The reality of co-parenting

On a day-to-day basis, most parents engage in both supportive and unsupportive co-parenting, because parents will not agree about everything. However, research shows that the best situation for children is when parents engage in more supportive co-parenting than unsupportive co-parenting. Children do better when their parents work together as a team and support each other's efforts.

Research shows parents can help or hinder children's adjustment depending on the quality of marital and co-parenting relationships. Regardless of whether their parents are married, children benefit when parents work to keep the co-parenting relationship strong and supportive.

Cooperation between parents is crucial to maintaining supportive co-parenting, but it requires parents to make a conscious effort to put their child's best interest first. Parents need to consider their child's thoughts and feelings when co-parenting and learn to see the world through their child's eyes. Parents should be supportive of each other and demonstrate mutual courtesy and respect.

When co-parenting disagreements arise, parents should work toward resolving the issue. Conflict resolution is crucial in learning how to manage disagreements. When parents resolve their disagreements, children feel confident that their parents can work together. When asked if good communication between parents makes it easier for children, one teenage boy replied, "Yeah, 'cause then if your parents get mad, then they can get mad at each other and then that makes it a lot easier on a kid because it's not really the kid's fault." Children recognize supportive co-parenting and everyone benefits from it.

Co-parenting after divorce

A group of researchers at the University of Missouri asked children about their parents' post-divorce relationships. According to these children, being put in the middle of their parents' disagreements is distressing. Here are some examples of what the children said:

- **Girl, age 14:** "I get stuck in the middle a lot: 'What's your dad doing?' 'What's your mom doing?' It kind of gets annoying 'cause then I get to a point where it's like, 'If you really want to know, ask them yourself.'"
- **Boy, age 10:** "I don't like being the messenger between parents. I mean they'll tell me something, like my mom will say, 'Oh, what's your dad doing?' or 'Oh, by the way, could you tell him this and that for me?' and it just goes back and forth for a while until I quit doing that. I just didn't want to do that anymore."

Keeping children out of the middle of post-divorce co-parenting conversations is important for a child's well-

being. Children need to be free from the responsibility of delivering messages and information between their parents. They also need to have the opportunity to focus on what is important to them.

Keys to conflict resolution

Handling difficult situations is a part of everyday life. Conflict sometimes erupts when trying to handle a disagreement or asking someone to change their behavior. How you handle and manage conflicts is important for your well-being and relationships.

Conflicts about co-parenting can be a disadvantage to children as well as to the marital relationship. One of the keys to successful conflict management is resolution. Children learn valuable lessons about handling disagreements when their parents resolve conflicts. This gives children confidence in their parents' ability to take care of matters and move forward.

Behaviors that help conflict resolution

Clear, non-defensive communication

Use I statements when you begin to talk about your thoughts and feelings. Begin your sentences with "I" (e.g., "I feel," "I think," "I was hurt") instead of "You" (e.g., "You make me mad," "You didn't do this"). When you use I statements instead of you statements, the other person is less likely to feel defensive.

Patient listening

Really listen while the other person is talking. Focus on what the other person is saying instead of thinking about what you are going to say next. Wait until they are finished talking before you respond.

Understanding and mutual respect

Try to see the other person's perspective. Think about their point of view and what they are saying. Recognize that one person's opinion is not better than another's.

Stay calm

Do your best to stay calm while working through a disagreement. Breathe slowly, silently count or pinch your thumb and forefinger together to avoid becoming upset or angry. If you or your partner become upset, stop talking and agree to continue when you have both calmed down.

Maintain focus

Focus on the topic at hand and work toward resolution of that issue. Keep unrelated issues out of the discussion.

Behaviors that hurt conflict resolution

Criticism

Avoid criticizing the other person and finding fault with his or her thoughts and ideas. This strategy makes a person feel hopelessly flawed. Instead, focus on what you would like to see changed. For example, saying "You're a slob" is an attack, whereas "I would like you to pick up your clothes" focuses on the actual behavior at issue.

Defensiveness

It can be easy to respond to another person's complaints or suggestions for change with defensiveness, such as by saying, "It's not my fault." Resist the urge to hear what is said as a personal attack. Instead, listen to your partner's words as helpful information and ideas. Keep your response non-emotional and view the exchange as intended to help, not to make someone feel bad.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is especially damaging because it is often intended to hurt another person. If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts about someone and imagine saying these things, stop these thought patterns and replace them with more compassionate ideas.

Passiveness

Withdrawing from the disagreement does not resolve the situation. Some people feel physically uncomfortable and tense during difficult conversations. Instead of responding to the physical discomfort, try to focus on the issue at hand and the words being said. If the conflict is too uncomfortable, you can say, "I can't calmly deal with this right now. Let's agree to talk about it in an hour, after I've calmed down and had time to think."

Two possible roads to resolution

- Consider each other's ideas and make a decision. This road involves negotiation and compromise. Although each person might make concessions, the solution should be agreeable to both.
- Let one person make the decision for both of you, even if you are not in total agreement with the outcome. "Agree to disagree," and move forward.

Conflict is natural. Conflicts are best resolved when parents are able to negotiate, apologize, let go of the disagreement and move forward. Research shows that even if parents resolve a disagreement "behind closed doors," children are less likely to get upset and more likely to feel better. When children experience unresolved co-parenting conflicts, they feel angry and distressed. Every step toward conflict resolution is a move in the right direction.

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This guide was originally authored by Sara Gable and Elizabeth Sharp.

Special thanks to Jason Hans and Mark Fine for sharing these quotes and others that appear in the text. This research was supported by MU's McNair Scholars Program.

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