

Partners for Your Child

3/17/2020

Last week, we talked about co-parenting with your spouse/partner when you live in the same home. This week, we're talking about co-parenting after a divorce or when parents do not live in the same home. Before we dive in, I (Lisa) want to be clear, this entire post is about co-parenting with a former partner under *safe* conditions. These concepts *do not apply* when there are real concerns about the physical and/or emotional safety of your children or of yourself.

Now that we're all on the same page, a lot of the same ideas apply as Sarah talked about last week. You and your former partner *both* have a say in parenting decisions. It is important for your kids that you and their other parent are on the same page and are able to work together.

This is difficult enough for two people who are in a loving relationship and live in the same home. Co-parenting after a relationship has dissolved presents its own set of challenges. Some people are able to end a relationship on a positive note, with little or no hard feelings between them. (Yes, it's true. Sarah and I have both worked with many of these couples and their kids). However, that is often not the case. It is common for two people who go through a divorce or end a relationship to have some negative feelings toward their former partner, particularly if there is conflict about custody arrangements, parenting, or other aspects of the split.

Think back to the questions Sarah asked you last week:

- Who's in charge of parenting?
- Who's in charge of homework/school?
- Who's in charge of home repairs?
- Who's in charge of paying the bills?
- Who's in charge of cooking?
- Who's in charge of cleaning?

Answering these questions is a little more complicated when your child goes between two homes. In your home, the answer to those questions is that you are the person in charge of those things. However, in your former partner's home, he/she is in charge of all of those things.

So, what happens when you and your ex are not on the same page in terms of how you parent your kids?



Yep, that's right. Fighting and chaos, with each parent trying to "win." When that happens, your kids lose.

When Sarah and I work with families that are having difficulty with co-parenting what we often see is that any unresolved negative feelings for each other interfere with their ability to engage in the steps necessary to work together. These parents have trouble giving each other the benefit of the doubt, trusting that they both have the children's best interests at heart, and trusting in each other's judgment. These difficulties have little to do with any objective measure of each other's parenting skills. Like most human beings, these parents are having trouble separating their roles. They have a hard time moving from their intimate relationship and the negative feelings created by the decline of their relationship into more of a business partnership that is focused solely on raising their kids.

One common suggestion Sarah and I make to parents who are having a hard time working together is that they get their own individual counseling to help them manage or resolve their feelings about the end of their relationship and their former partner. Doing this makes it easier for them to collaborate.

Another helpful tool is to have a solid parenting plan that outlines each parent's rights and responsibilities in raising their children. A good parenting plan is one both parents collaborate to create.*

Now, creating the parenting plan is one thing. Following it and truly co-parenting with your ex is another. Remember those questions from the beginning of the post? I bet when you answered them you also had a picture in your mind of each of those tasks being accomplished. Well, guess what? So does your ex. And neither of those pictures is necessarily right or wrong.

I know, right?

Just like for parents who are living together, one parent's way of doing things is not necessarily better than the other parent's way. What makes it more complicated for parents who do not live together is that you must fully trust the care of your child to the other parent and you have *no say* in what that parent does or how they do it.

Here I go again with the good news. But, it's true. *You and your ex do not get to make the rules in each other's homes.* Accepting that is an ongoing challenge, but once you do, co-parenting becomes much easier.

That is why it is so important for you and your ex-spouse/partner to be able to collaborate with one another. While the rules and routines do not need to be identical between homes, having the same general expectations for your children (e.g., behavior, activities they are allowed to

join, peers they are allowed to spend time with) is critical. When expectations are similar, you and your ex are more likely to make similar parenting decisions. See how that works?

Figuring out the most effective way to communicate with one another is also critical. Some former partners are able to talk with one another in person or over the phone. Others have difficulty being in the same room with one another. True co-parenting does not require you to be friends with your ex or even to spend extended amounts of time in the same place. It's okay if you communicate through emails or a communication tool like Talking Parents. The important thing is for you and your ex to share information and make important decisions collaboratively, whatever that looks like for you. It's also important that your kids are not the message carriers between you and your ex. That causes confusion for your kids and forces them to "take sides."

Ok, now for the key. The most important thing to remember is that *your relationship with your former partner is not the same as your child's relationship with your former partner*. Your ex is your ex, but your ex is *your child's parent*.

Your kids have to know that it is okay, and is in fact healthy, to have good relationships with both parents. In fact, decades of research have shown this to be true. Kids whose parents are able to work together collaboratively to co-parent have better outcomes than kids whose parents have a high-conflict divorce or end to their relationship.*

Two people ending a relationship is difficult enough; when children are involved, it becomes much more complicated. It is up to the adults to put the well-being of their children ahead of "winning."

At some point, you and your former partner liked each other enough to make a baby. Whatever the status of your relationship is at this point, you still have a child to raise into a healthy, functioning adult. Keeping that in mind will help you make decisions with your child's best interests at heart and will make it easier for you and your child's other parent to work together. To help you get some clarity, we created some journaling pages for you. Check out our free printable, *How Do I Really Feel about Co-Parenting with My Ex?*

*Resources for helping children cope with divorce:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/children-and-divorce.htm>
<https://extension2.missouri.edu/gh6600>

*Collaborative Divorce/Parenting Plans:

<https://www.legalzoom.com/articles/what-is-collaborative-divorce>
<https://www.divorcemag.com/blog/creating-a-successful-parenting-plan>