

Co-Parenting

Many divorces are complicated by the reality of co-parenting after the roles of husband and wife have ended. Despite whatever anger, sadness or pain may have existed within the marriage, the parents are now faced with parenting their children separately.

Some parents want very little interaction with each other and can be surprised by how much there is to negotiate on an ongoing basis. This is especially true if the two have different parenting styles or the kids are involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, drama or afterschool clubs. Some parents may only want to know who will have whom when and where and leave it at that. However, there is more than this first layer of communication to consider.

A closer look at co-parenting reveals many possible discussions and possible disagreements about various topics. What happens when one parent allows the child their own cell phone when the other parent is adamantly against it? What are the rules about bedtime, curfew, or being unsupervised at the mall or a skate park of questionable reputation? Some parents always require their kids to wear helmets when biking, skating or skate boarding while the other doesn't enforce the rule.

As common as video and computer games have become, they are often the source of conflict between divorced co-parenting adults. One allows their 9 year-old access to rated M material while the other parent finds this unacceptable. Some parents see war games as entertainment and not a problem despite the R rating and an underage child.

Granted different people will parent differently, but it's the kids who get caught in the middle when parents don't negotiate these matters or don't have a way to communicate about them when they do come up.

During the divorce process I suggest parents visualize the future. What can they do now to ensure that each is welcome to attend a graduation ceremony or a wedding in the distant future? Talk about expectations, rules and boundaries in each household. Having a plan for communication is important so that the kids don't become a vehicle for relaying messages, which may not be accurately conveyed or forgotten all together. Sometimes it is the messenger who is on the receiving end of the anger a message brings.

Once the divorce is over the co-parenting begins. The more adults plan ahead the better they will be able to protect their children from further conflict. Whether we are aware of it or not, we do send messages to our kids about our feelings in non-verbal and often subtle ways. Be as positive about their other parent as you can, even if that means simply being polite.

If there seem to be too many difficulties in getting along, please seek professional help. I provide Co-Parent Counseling focusing on communication between parents while keeping the kids in mind at all times. When parents fight kids suffer.