

PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE

Four types of co-parenting styles after divorce have been identified in the most comprehensive longitudinal study ever conducted on the effects of divorce on children (Wallerstein, J. and Blakeslee, S. *What About the Kids? Raising Your Children Before, During, and After Divorce*. New York: Hyperion, 2003). These styles describe qualities of the co-parenting relationship after divorce, and it should be obvious which of them are most effective at reducing anxiety in the children. The four co-parenting styles are:

1. “Perfect pals”: These are co-parents who share decision making and child rearing. They respect each other and are capable of doing family activities together. They may even maintain their friendship with each other. As a psychologist, I have had the good fortune of working with some families where this style was evident.
2. “Cooperative colleagues”: While not friends with each other, these co-parents can work together for the sake of their children. They communicate amicably, share parenting responsibilities, and control their feelings and underlying conflicts.
3. “Angry associates”: Adversarial battles and ongoing anger are characteristic of these co-parents after divorce. In this type of relationship, there are frequent conflicts around custody and visitations.
4. “Fiery foes”: In this hostile relationship, the ex-spouses have no capacity for cooperation as parents. They are the parents whose battles return to court because they are unable to communicate with each other.

Naturally, parents who cannot get along while married are likely to have difficulty cooperating after divorce. While becoming “perfect pals” might be unrealistic in many cases, becoming “cooperative colleagues” is achievable. Cooperation after divorce is an important goal for reducing anxiety in children.

Here are some tips for becoming cooperative parents after divorce:

- First and foremost, stay focused on your children’s needs for peace, stability, and minimal loss.
- Recognize that your child’s well-being requires a cooperative partnership with your ex-spouse.
- Show the chapter, “How Families Create Anxiety in Children” (in The Worried Child by Paul Foxman, Ph.D.) to your ex-spouse, and express your willingness to do your part towards becoming “cooperative colleagues.”
- Seek personal therapy, if necessary, to let go of any anger, bitterness, or hurt that stands in the way of cooperative co-parenting.

- Learn conflict-resolution skills, if necessary, to learn to communicate cooperatively with your ex-spouse.
- In your new relationships, seek support for your efforts to be cooperative with your ex-spouse.
- Do not use your child as a messenger or conduit for communicating with your ex-spouse.
- Communicate directly with each other by phone or e-mail and out of range of your child.
- Think ahead before you talk with your ex-spouse, and choose times when you are relaxed rather than stressed, hungry, or tired.
- If necessary, use a facilitator to keep communication cooperative and focused on the children's best interests.
- The legal system is adversarial and can reinforce a "win-lose" attitude. Try to resolve differences out of court, as arrangements are more likely to succeed if both parties are in agreement.
- If your ex-spouse cannot be won over to the idea of cooperation, stay on the high road of civility and self-control, and trust that your child will be better off for your efforts.