

How To Establish A Conflict Free Co-parenting Experience

By Rudy Garcia: Founder ~ Sole Support: The Single Parent Family Network

When both parents agree to parent cooperatively and share equally in the raising of their kids, there is a strong chance that the experience will be relatively free of conflict. But many single parents have too much pain, anger and immaturity to be able to parent cooperatively. Single parents can ease their stress and conflict, and improve their chances for a new, positive "two home" family plan when they follow the steps outlined below.

Step One: Create a new relationship with the other parent based on Humility.

Your kids learned a lot about communication, problem solving, respect and tolerance from you and your former partner during the living together phase of your relationship. And yet, they will learn a lot more from you during the separated phase. After all, the separated phase will probably last a lot longer.

So what do you want to teach them? Do you want to teach them bitterness or forgiveness? Do you want to teach them depression or acceptance? Do you want to teach them intolerance or flexibility? Do you want to teach them anger or understanding?

Once you and the other parent decide not to live together, the reasons that contributed to this decision are unimportant. Shoulds, woulds, coulds and dids are judgment packed references that have historical value, as regards the now defunct partnership. And they have value when considering what to look for when it's time to have a new intimate relationship. But these judgment packed references can be a huge roadblock to the successful creation of a cooperative co-parenting relationship with your former partner. Another major problem with maintaining an anger and judgment based relationship with the other parent is what it does to your relationship with the kids. Here's an idea to consider: When you teach your children to love the other parent, your children will learn to love you more. When you teach your children not to love the other parent, your children will learn to fear you.

Here's why: Your kids are made up of one-half you, one-half the other parent. Your ability to judge and reject the other parent sends a quiet message to your kids. It tells them that you can judge and reject them as well, because they are half made of the other parent. Don't bother reassuring them that you can hate and reject the other parent but love them (your kids) unconditionally. When's the last time you believed a mechanic when they finished a brake job on your car and told you that the thumping sound that's unnerving you whenever you hit the brakes is nothing to worry about?

Of course you and the other parent have every right to harbor negative feelings towards one another. But are these feelings a sound foundation for building a new relationship with each other that is intended to support your kids? Are these negative feelings so strong that it's difficult not to express them, even in front of the kids? Are these negative feelings keeping you or the other parent from being able to treat each other fairly regarding visitation, child support, community property or spousal support? If it's a cooperative relationship with the other parent that you're seeking, anger, mistrust, resentment and a desire to punish won't get you there. The foundation for cooperation, especially between people who have been conflict-oriented, is humility.

Humility is the expression of love that most easily diffuses judgment and defensiveness. After all, if you're willing to let go of blame, won't that make it easier for the other parent to let go of it as well? Humility is tough to achieve when we need anger and judgment to help us disconnect from someone that we have once loved. The irony is that shared children will always keep us together. And, even if it doesn't feel like it presently, that's a good thing. Once separated, we must learn to connect with the other parent in a new way that supports love without the expectation of being together.

How do you move past negative feelings to humility? Ask yourself questions that lead you to where your choices contributed to a terminal relationship. Did you see problems before the marriage (or getting pregnant) and diminished them because you wanted the relationship so badly? What personality traits do you possess that, mixed with the other parent's traits, inflamed the relationship? What did you learn from your parents about affection, judgment, problem solving and forgiveness? How might these factors have affected your relationship?

Questions such as these provide valuable insight into our own relationship needs and abilities. From this humble perspective, we are able to develop a new relationship with the other parent, a relationship that can be less judgmental and therefore less defensive. And when we are less defensive, we are able to be more tolerant, flexible, creative and caring in the way that we redesign our new "two home" family.

By the way, you don't have to share your personal insights with the other parent. It might not be an emotionally safe thing to do. Being humble does not mean being vulnerable at the wrong time. Bring this perspective of Humility to the negotiation table and you will not only walk away with more for the whole family, you will walk away with a "whole" new family.

More importantly, they could contribute to the continuation of a conflict-oriented relationship that damages the children's ability to:

1. Have an uncomplicated love relationship with both parents;
2. Have easy access to both parents;
3. Establish healthy intimate adult relationships when their time comes.

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Step Two: Expand the idea of what a "Whole Family" is.

As much as possible, avoid isolating yourself as a "Single Parent." During this particular time in your life, you ought to expand your circle of love and support! Most of the time, the other parent is available at some level of support. It's important for your health and the emotional welfare of your kids that the other parent be involved. Co-operative co-parenting between separated, divorced or never married parents can be as effective, for the whole family, as the more traditional "two parents under the same roof" family plan. The focused attention that the children receive from the present parent can strengthen the love bond between them while enabling the other parent to recharge their parent batteries and have necessary adult time.

Therefore, make it as easy as possible for both parents to have an abundance of time with the kids. Here are some fundamental points to consider:

1. Live close to each other
2. As far as possible, make career choices that give both of you some flexibility with your schedules?
3. Similarly, make career choices that make you less financially dependent on each other. If this means enhancing your education, support each other in this personal venture that ultimately serves the whole family
4. Keep each other informed about everything that impacts the kid's lives such as Parent-Teacher conferences, children's activities and illnesses or injuries
5. Avoid new intimate relationships with anyone who is insecure about your ongoing parent relationship or jealous about the time that you want to spend with your kids

Remember, successful co-parenting has three "C"s: Communicate; Coordinate; Cooperate.

Step Three: Respect Your Children's Right To Love Both Parents.

Here is a very important point, and I hope that you agree with it: Children get to be small. They don't have to understand things that are complex. They don't have to be responsible for taking care of their parents. They don't have to be afraid to love one parent for fear that the other parent will be angry with them. Certainly, the older the kids are, the more they can be expected to handle. But it is important to respect a child's right to never have to handle anything that isn't his or hers. That includes the parents' financial struggles, conflicts, accusations and indictments against each other.

So if you are having a major meltdown in your relationship with the other parent, remember where you are when you need to let off steam. Would you drive a raging bull through a beautiful garden? Probably not. Think of your child's love for you and the other parent as a fragile, beautiful garden and point the raging bull in another direction.

The Children's Boundaries that follow are pretty basic, you probably are already aware of them and respecting them. But if you or the other parent is having trouble keeping any of these, you can obtain a more detailed article on children's boundaries called: Entering The Children's Home by contacting Sole Support at 949-837-7653 or at our website: Sole Support Online. It's on the Brainfood page).

Remember, your kids have the absolute right to love the other parent without reservation. Even if the other parent is ignoring these boundaries, you must not. Respect your kid's boundaries so that they have an emotionally safe, uncomplicated place to call home. Once these boundaries are mastered, cooperative co-parenting becomes the single most important element in creating a stress-free and conflict-free family plan.

The Children's Boundaries:

1. Don't expect a child to feel the way you do about the other parent
2. Don't ask a child to keep a secret from the other parent
3. Don't pry information about the other parent's life from your child
4. Don't relay messages to the other parent through your child
5. Don't ask a child how you should solve a problem with the other parent
6. Don't tell your child about any conflicts between you and the other parent
7. Don't ventilate your negative feelings about the other parent near your child

These boundaries fall into a category called Triangulation. It means that we are forcing our kids to get meshed into our adult relationship. This enmeshment may create feelings of anxiety, conflict, confusion and emotional withdrawal for the kids. So remember to respect their rights before you involve them in anything that has to do with the other parent. Comfort your children through the difficult transition from a two-parent home to a two-home family plan with love and hugs. Respect their right to be kids. They don't need to have the complex pressures that tear adult relationships apart explained to them.

Another children's boundary falls into a category that we call: Parentification. This is a term that we attach to actions that cause a child to have to take on responsibilities that they are not ready for, either age-wise or maturity-wise. This happens when two-parent homes become single-parent homes and a child is suddenly thrust into the role of caretaker for the other kids. It can also happen when a parent who is overwhelmed by stress, loneliness or grief becomes emotionally needy and the children become sources of emotional support for the parent.

Parentification significantly contributes to feelings of guilt and co-dependency for children who have been victim to it. So be very careful in the way that you assign responsibilities to your kids. Of course, reduced adult support and financial limitations sometimes necessitate a child's taking on additional responsibilities for the family. While many children seem to thrive on added responsibility, be careful to provide that child with plenty of opportunity to be the child that he or she is. Very often a child will get a lot of ego gratification from behaving like a "little adult" only to discover later on that they have lost the ability to be spontaneous, flexible and playful. In addition, be sure to have plenty of emotional support for yourself from other adults so that you don't unwittingly lean on your kids for your emotional needs. And if you've ever heard a parent say, "my kid is my best friend," buy that parent a book on boundaries as fast as you can!

To summarize: Three Steps to take to make Single Parenting easier

1. It's much easier to build a cooperative co-parent relationship when parents connect with humility rather than judgment. Behaving humbly and with tolerance and acceptance also teaches our children healthier ways to relate with others
2. Avoid the isolating label "Single Parent". You are a co-parent with a partner who lives elsewhere. Mutual support is more productive and healing. If that other person has completely disappeared and you can't find them, then try to maintain an ongoing relationship with relatives from the other parent's side of the family
3. Learn what your children's rightful boundaries are and respect them. It will make their home with you a much safer place to be. That will ease the air of tension that so often permeates a single parent's home (and get rid of this term, will you!). Respecting your kid's boundaries will also significantly reduce the opportunity for conflict between you and the other parent

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