

Parallel Parenting for High Conflict Families

by Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D.

There's been a great deal of publicity lately about the negative impact of divorce on children. Wallerstein et al. (2000), highlighted a small group of children who have shown ongoing problems many years after the divorce of their parents. They report that children of divorce are at higher risk for developing academic, relationship, and substance abuse problems than children who grow up in non-divorced homes. Other researchers (Kelly, 2000; Amato, 2001; and Emery, 1999) have reported that children of divorce may be at higher risk, but that the majority of children in families of divorce do not show behavioral, emotional, or academic problems following their parents' divorce. Emery eloquently points out that, while there is a statistical difference between these groups, in that more children in divorced families are having problems than children in non-divorced families, research evidence suggests that there is not a one-to-one relationship between divorce and problems in any child domain. They conclude that resilience, rather than risk, is the normative outcome for children of divorce.

At the same time, however, research suggests that the children exposed to conflict, both in marriage and after divorce, experience the most significant problems. If parents continue fighting after their divorce, children begin to exhibit more behavioral and emotional problems. When parents divorce, children hope the fighting will go away so that they can get some peace in their life. Many children might not mind the divorce if

their parents would finally learn to get along better. After the divorce, children want peace in their lives, and they want the opportunity to love both of their parents without loyalty conflicts. Instead, when conflicts worsen, children are left with many wounds. These wounds and prolonged frustration can include feelings of disillusionment, fear, insecurity, vulnerability, and other such emotions. Children develop loyalty conflicts and become afraid to love both of their parents or to express their love for one parent in front of the other parent. Many of these children become aligned with only one parent, in part to reduce their anxiety and insecurity (Stahl, 1999; Kelly and Johnston, 2001). This is one factor in alienated children, those children who feel that they can't have a relationship with both parents because they can't handle the stress.

Divorced children frequently feel that they have failed or blame themselves when their parents stay in conflict, and they feel even more insecure when they can't prevent the arguments. While many forces are potential contributors to children becoming alienated (including but not limited to the attitudes and behaviors of both parents, the temperament and emotions of the children, sibling reactions, the intensity of conflict in the courts, and attitudes of relatives and others, for example), conflict between the parents is a potential source of significant difficulty for children.

At its worst, children experiencing intense conflict have to take sides because they can't manage the internal tension and anxiety they feel. For these children, there is a risk of serious psychological regression where they will see one parent as mostly bad and the other parent as mostly good. This psychological "splitting", as it is called, is damaging to

children because it reinforces a style in which they view the world in a “black and white” or “all or nothing” way rather than a more balanced view of good and bad in most people.

Behaviorally, children are likely to express their wounds with regression, aggression, withdrawal, or depression. They show signs of increased insecurity around the transition between homes, they worry, and they may be reluctant to express affection. They may feel embarrassed, daydream a lot, and have trouble in school. They are likely to feel responsible for their parents’ conflicts, and be more edgy emotionally. They might become clingy with one or both parents. In young children, signs of regression can include bed wetting and temper tantrums. School-age children often have difficulty with their school work or they might have fights with peers and become behavior problems in the classroom. By the time a child reaches adolescence, these children are at risk of expressing their wounds with rebelliousness, substance abuse, sexual acting out, and other serious or self-destructive behaviors.

While it is common for parents to blame the other when these symptoms erupt, it is common for both parents to play a role in these difficulties. Highly conflicted parents need to recognize that they might engage in both obvious and not-so-obvious behaviors which pressure their children and cause them to feel this way. Communication problems between angry parents is a primary source of emotional difficulties for children. Ahrons (2001) described four types of co-parental relationships, including Parenting Pals, Cooperative Colleagues, Angry Associates, and Fiery Foes. In particular, Angry Associates and Fiery Foes have communication and cooperation patterns which lead to

significant conflict. Such parents tend to argue over many things. Psychological issues that lead to conflicted parenting are many, and may include:

- continuation of hostility that began during the marriage
- differing perceptions of pre-separation child-rearing roles
- differing perceptions of post-separation child-rearing roles
- differing perceptions of how to parent
- concern about the adequacy of the other parent's parenting ability
- an unwillingness of one or both parents to accept the end of the relationship
- jealousy about a new partner in the other parent's life
- contested child custody issues
- personality factors in one or both parents that stimulate conflict.

Whatever the specific source, parents' inability to separate their parental roles from prior conflict in the marriage is often a significant contribution to the conflict after the divorce. This conflict is perhaps the most important variable in determining how children adjust to their parents' divorce. Parents need to do whatever it takes to change their level of conflict. The first step in this process is to learn to *disengage* from the other parent. Disengagement is one of the possible styles of parenting after divorce. If parents disengage, they can set up a "demilitarized zone" around their children and have little or no contact with the other parent. Parents must do this first to reduce the conflict and before developing a parallel style of parenting.

Parallel parenting is a style of parenting in which both parents learn to parent their

child effectively, doing the best job each can do during the time the child is in their respective care. Parents disengage from each other so that conflicts are avoided. Parallel parenting gets its name from a similar concept in children's play. Psychologists have observed that young children who play together, but do not have the skills to interact, engage in a process of parallel play. If they are in a sandbox together or taking turns going down a slide, they play next to one another, not with one another. Each child is doing her own thing with the toys, and generally ignoring the other. As children get older, and more mature, they will learn to interact cooperatively and play together.

Similarly, parallel parenting is a process of parenting next to one another because parents are unable to co-parent together. Before parents can learn to co-parent, they will each learn to parent on their own. The task for mediators and parent educators is to teach parents how to parallel parent. Parents need to be taught that the important information revolves around the health, welfare, and interests of their child.

The first step of parallel parenting is disengagement. Disengagement means that parents will not communicate about minor things regarding their child. They will not criticize each other or bicker over things that have always led to conflicts in the past. Parents are taught to give the other parent important information about their child, but will not get into debates about the parenting plan or about each other's parenting style. Parents will learn that they can raise their children differently, and the children may still be okay.

Parents need to be taught what information needs to be communicated and how to

do it. Health, medical, and school information is critical. For example, if the child is sick, parents inform each other, with details on what medication is needed, what has already been administered, and when the next dose is to be given. If the child has a school field trip, parents inform the other of the details, and use their parenting plan (Stahl, 2000) to decide who might go with the child on the field trip. Each parent takes turns taking their child to routine doctor and dentist visits. If you are the parent who receives your child's report card, copy it and send it to the other parent. Do this with medical and extra-curricular activity information, such as your child's little league schedule. Do not complain to the other parent when she is ten minutes late for an exchange of your child, and don't argue over whose turn it is to get your child's next haircut. Have parameters in your parenting plan for some of these things and ignore the rest. When parents disengage from each other, each will develop an independent relationship with their child's teachers, doctors, coaches, and friends so that they don't have to rely on the other parent for such information.

When parents are trying to disengage, but communication is necessary, it is often best if non-emergency communication is done by mail, fax or e-mail. Parents can be taught to use faxes if both have sufficient privacy in receiving the fax. By putting their communication in writing, parents can learn that they will have time to gather their thoughts to ensure that the tone is not argumentative. This lets the receiving parent take time to do the same in order to prevent an impulsive, angry, or sarcastic response. Parents should be discouraged from sharing e-mails and faxes with their your children as they are

only meant to share important information between the parents. While parents can be taught to send time-sensitive material, such as a notice from school, to the other parent on the day they receive, they should also be encouraged to limit other non-emergency communication to twice a month. Obviously, emergency information about illnesses and injuries, unforeseen delays in visitation (as a result of traffic conditions, for example), or immediate school concerns should be shared by phone as soon as possible. However, by reducing general communication, and by putting necessary communications in writing, parents can go a long way toward disengaging from conflict.

When helping parents with very young children, it is important to teach them to share all aspects of their child's functioning with one another. A useful tool is a "parent communication notebook." In this notebook parents should write down the highlights of the child's emotions and behaviors during their respective parenting time. Parents should include observations of their child's health, feeding and sleeping patterns, language issues, the child's mood, what upsets the child and soothing techniques, daily routines, and any other detailed information about the child's functions and needs. This notebook should stay with the child, being sent back and forth during transitions, so both parents can use it as a forum for preserving thoughts about their child and her needs.

Ultimately, parents need to learn that there are many things that parents argue about that aren't so important. In general, the research suggests that a prime source of conflict is different parenting philosophies and difficulty sharing their child. Parents need to accept that there is more than one "right way" to parent, learn to be less rigid and more

accepting of the other parent, and do the best job of parenting during the time the child is with them, without criticizing the other parent. Children are capable of being parented in two different styles, and many children of divorce adjust quite well to two very different homes.

One method for teaching some of these skills has been developed by parent educators who have created programs designed especially for high conflict families. The primary purpose of these programs is to help those parents who are mired in protracted conflict to recognize the ways that conflicts manifest themselves and learn new methods of resolving their differences. One particular program, in use in Contra Costa County California (the author's local community) is designed to teach high conflict parents (those who Ahrons referred to as "Fiery Foes") to disengage from their conflict and learn parallel parenting techniques so that they can become less angry and more business-like in their approach with one another. Using a six week curriculum, focusing on communication, stress, impact of conflict on children, impulse control, and empathy, this skill-based program uses a combination of role plays, video's, group interaction and didactic information from the group leaders to teach the skills described above.

Primary goals of the program are to:

- Develop empathy for the children and the other parent.
- Learn constructive ways to solve problems.
- Learn new communication techniques, especially clarifying and listening.
- Learn value of parallel parenting rather than trying to force themselves to coparent.

- Understand the effects of conflict on their children and on each other.
- Recognize ways that stress, anger, violence, substance use, and emotions cause problems for themselves, their ex-partner, and their children.
- Ultimately, the entire program is designed to assist parents in understanding their respective role in the conflicts, learn to take personal responsibility, and reduce blame.

Over the next few months, the author will be developing more information regarding this particular program and it will be available either from the author or the Judicial Council of California. It is hoped that, with such programs available, high-conflict families can get the necessary assistance from mediators and parent educators to parallel parent their children.

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Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D., a psychologist practicing in Danville California and licensed in California and Michigan, can be reached via email at pstahl@earthlink.net or visit his website at www.parentingafterdivorce.com. This article was based on his presentation "Parallel Parenting for High Conflict Families", presented at the Family Conflict Resolution and Mediation conference, sponsored by MACRO and the University of Maryland Law School, November, 2001.