

## *Cooperative Parenting or Parallel Parenting?*<sup>1</sup>

Research on families of divorce suggest that there are primarily three styles of parenting for families after a divorce: *cooperative*, *conflicted*, or *disengaged*. *Cooperative* parenting is the style used by families in which conflict is low and parents can effectively communicate about their child. If you determine that your level of conflict is low, you and the other parent will probably be able to talk about your child's needs in a healthy way. You will probably agree on most parenting values, be relatively consistent in your parenting styles, and have few arguments about your child's life. You will rarely put your child in the middle, and you will solve differences peacefully. Research shows that children of divorce fare best when parents can be cooperative in their parenting. If you fall in this category, you should feel good about yourselves and know that you are helping your child immensely. There are many good books on cooperative parenting designed to help parents do a more effective job.

This book focuses on those parents who are in *conflict* and argue a lot or need to disengage in their parenting. Even if you can sometimes parent cooperatively, you find it to be difficult and are in conflict too much of the time. *Conflicted* parenting is the worst for children, who are often in the middle of the conflicts. Your children will adjust to your divorce easier if you can avoid conflicted parenting. 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 your child adjusts to your divorce. Do whatever it takes to change your 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 you disengage, it's like you have developed a "demilitarized zone" around your children and have little or no contact with the other parent. When you disengage, you will avoid contact with the other parent so that conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *Chapter 2 of Parenting After Divorce* (Impact Publishers, 2000). © Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D.

cannot develop. You must do this first to reduce the conflict and before you can move on to the next style of parenting.

The second step in this process is what I call *parallel parenting*. In this style of parenting, both of you will each learn to parent your child effectively, doing the best job each of you can do during the time you are with your child. You will continue to disengage from the other parent so that conflicts are avoided. If you determine that you cannot cooperatively parent because your level of conflict is moderate or high, disengagement and parallel parenting is the necessary style of parenting.

Parallel parenting gets its name from a similar concept in children's play. Research 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. When they get older, they will learn to interact cooperatively and play *together*.

Similarly, parallel parenting is a process of parenting next to one another because you are unable to parent together. Before you can learn to co-parent, you will each learn to parent on your own. The first step of parallel parenting is disengagement. This means that you will not communicate about minor things regarding your child. You will not bicker over things that have always led to conflicts in the past. You will give the other parent important information about your child, but you will not get into debates about the parenting plan or about each other's parenting style.

“Important information” means the health, welfare, and interests of your child. If your child is sick, you will inform the other parent of this fact, with details on what medication is needed, what has already been administered, and when the next dose is to be given. If your child has a school field trip, you will inform the other parent of the details, and use your parenting plan to decide who might go with the child on the field trip. Each of you should develop independent relationships with your child's teachers, doctors, coaches, and friends so that you don't have to rely on the other parent for your information. Each of you should take turns taking your child to the doctor and dentist. 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 are trying to disengage, but communication is necessary, it is often best if non-emergency communication is done by mail, fax or e-mail. Only use faxes if both of you have sufficient privacy where you will receive the fax. By putting your communication in writing, you will have time to gather your thoughts and make sure that the

tone is not argumentative. This also lets the receiving parent take some time and gather his thoughts so that he is not impulsive or angry in his response. Sarcasm is never helpful when trying to disengage from conflicts. Don't share your e-mails and faxes with your children; they are simply meant to share important information between the parents. Try to limit non-emergency communication to twice a month, except for sharing information that is time-sensitive (like faxing a notice from school to the other parent on the day you receive it). 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, you will go a long way toward disengaging from conflict.

If you have very young children, you know it is important to share all aspects of your child's functions with the care provider when you drop her off. In the same way, it is critical for parents to share detailed information with each other upon the exchange of the child. A useful tool is a "parent communication notebook." In this notebook you will write down the highlights of your child's emotions and behaviors during the time she's with you. Fill out the notebook in great detail and pass it along to the other parent at the time of transition. Things to include in this notebook are your observations of your child's health, feeding and sleeping patterns, language issues, your child's mood, what soothes your child, what upsets your child, your daily routine, and any other detailed information about your child's functions and needs. This notebook should stay with your child so both parents can use it as a forum for preserving thoughts about your child and her needs.

Another step in parallel parenting is not telling the other parent how to parent, and ignoring (rather than arguing back) when the other parent tries to tell you how to parent. Support different styles of parenting in order to avoid conflict. Obviously, some things are very important, such as consistent discipline philosophies and techniques, adequate supervision, giving your child necessary medication, and ensuring that your child gets to school on time with homework completed. If you have concerns about these very important issues, you will need a forum for working out your differences.

There are many things that parents argue about that aren't so important. Some of this is related to different parenting philosophies and some of it is related to the difficulty of sharing your child. Accept that there is more than one "right way" to parent. Learn to be less rigid and more accepting of your child's other parent. Rather than trying to change how the other parent does his job of parenting, do your best job of parenting during the time your child is with you, 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. Remember, just as you will want to avoid criticizing the other parent, you will not want to deal with criticism of your parenting techniques.