



The *Co-Parenting: Two Parents, Two Homes* class is provided by Family and School Partnerships, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). This curriculum was developed to help parents focus on the responsibilities of parenting from separate households and keeping children out of the middle of parental conflict. The curriculum covers different models of parenting from separate homes and common co-parenting challenges. It helps parents to be aware of the effects of separation or divorce on their children and the importance of providing for the financial needs of their children. It also provides parents with a variety of options for resolving conflicts. The curriculum was developed in 1995 and revised in 2013 to include the most current information for class participants.

The *Co-Parenting: Two Parents, Two Homes* curriculum meets the requirements of the Code of Virginia.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
The Grief Process	4
The Effects of Separation or Divorce on Children	5
How Children Feel About Family Violence	11
What Children Need and Don't Need	12
Financial Responsibilities	13
Co-Parenting and Parallel Parenting	14
Parenting Styles	16
Discipline	19
Household Responsibilities	20
Children's Self-Esteem and Resiliency	22
Communication	24
Points to Remember for Successful Communication	25
Active Listening	26
Managing Your Anger	27
Recognizing and Managing Your Child's Anger	28
Issues That May "Trigger" Conflict	29
Conflict Prevention	30
Conflict Resolution	32
Long-Distance Parenting	34
Never Married Parents	35
Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren	37
New Relationships and Your Children	38
Stress Management	39
Legal Terms	40



Introduction

Why you are here:

1. To learn parenting skills in order to increase your effectiveness in parenting from two separate homes.
2. To become aware of the impact of parental conflict on children.
3. To learn to keep your children out of the middle of conflict.
4. To identify what triggers anger or conflict and learn problem solving and negotiation techniques.
5. To identify and meet the needs of your children.
6. To encourage the positive involvement of both parents in the lives of your children.

Becoming a co-parent is a process:

1. Let go of your “couple” relationship and let go of the perception of being competitors or combatants.
2. Focus on the “business” of parenting. Business partners (and co-parents) don't have to like each other to work together.
3. Acknowledge that co-parenting isn't a competitive sport or popularity contest—it's hard work and may be the most important work you will ever do.

Being an effective co-parent is a choice. In order to begin the process, take these first steps:

1. Shift from focusing on each other—“parent-focus” to focusing on your child or children—“child-focus”.
2. Treat each other with respect, even if you don't feel it.
3. Keep your child or children out of the middle of your issues.

The Grief Process

Denial

- Feelings** The first response to a significant or unexpected change is often shock—general refusal to recognize the facts. This affords protection from being overwhelmed. “This isn’t happening to me. He (she) will change his (her) mind and everything will go back to the way it was.”
- Behaviors** Putting off decisions, refusing to face reality, lack of concentration, forgetfulness.

Anger

- Feelings** A protective, energizing emotion. Personal and family distress levels rise. “This isn’t fair. I did everything right.”
- Behaviors** Irritability, impatience, inability to complete tasks, possibly taking emotions out on family and friends.

Bargaining

- Feelings** “What if” and fantasy thinking.
- Behaviors** Trying to “make a deal” to keep things from changing.

Depression

- Feelings** Sadness and mourning the past more than dealing with the present or preparing for the future.
- Behaviors** Indecision, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, withdrawal, frequent crying, becoming isolated and alone.

Acceptance

- Feelings** New energy and realization that you are going to make it through the change.
- Behaviors** Developing a positive attitude and forward, future-focused thinking. Getting out and getting involved.

These feelings will happen at different times. You may think you have gone through all steps; then a calendar date or event will remind you of the changes, and you feel sad and angry all over again. This is normal. Be patient with yourself.

Pay attention to your children. They are grieving too. Be able to recognize the stress, anger, and sadness in your children.

Source: Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

The Effects of Separation or Divorce on Children

There are many factors that influence a child's reaction to parental divorce or separation:

- The age or developmental stage of a child will influence his or her ability to understand or accept what is happening in the family. (A detailed description of children's reactions and what parents can do are outlined later in this section).
- A child's gender may be an influence. Typically, boys have a harder time adjusting to parental separation or divorce. Boys may be living more of their time with mom, not having dad as a daily role model. Many boys fear that they will eventually lose contact with their father. Boys tend to feel that they are "the man of the house" and that it is their responsibility to protect mom and their siblings. Also, boys have a greater difficulty expressing their emotions and needs. Boys may experience a delayed grieving or "sleeper effect" which usually appears during their teen years.
- Some children have a temperament or personality that tends to be resistant to change, thus leading them to have a harder time adjusting to changes in family structure and routine. Other children may have a more easy-going personality and tend to adjust more quickly.
- Attachment to the parent is another factor. Children, especially young children, tend to cycle from being attached to mom, to being attached to dad. If, for example, dad were to leave the marital home when his two-year-old was more attached to him, it would have a greater impact on the child. Also, if a parent comes into the life of a child after a period of absence, a positive attachment or bonding may not have formed, and it may take a child a period of time to be comfortable with that parent.

Other factors include:

- The degree of conflict between the parents, including family violence.
- The quality of parental communication with each other and with their children.
- The number of changes experienced by the child.
- The influence of extended family.
- The frequency and quality of contact with both parents.
- Financial difficulties or economic decline.
- The mental health of the parents.
- Parents putting their children "in the middle," using them as the messenger, spy, or for other purposes.
- Role reversal in which the children take care of the parent's needs, especially emotional needs.
- Parental manipulation, whether by using money or verbal put-downs, to make one parent seem superior to the other.
- Geographical distance between parent and child.
- The failure of the non-custodial parent to have contact and a relationship with the child that results in the child fearing rejection or abandonment.

How children react to parental separation or conflict depends on their age and developmental stage. Parents need to be able to accurately interpret their child's behavior. They need to make the distinction between a child acting out in defiance of rules or acting out due to stress or insecurity. The most common feelings exhibited by children are fear, stress, sadness, guilt, loneliness, rejection, confusion, anger, anxiety, and withdrawal. In high-conflict families, some children may even show signs of relief at having parents in separate homes.

When assessing a child's reaction, keep in mind that these behaviors are normal or usual reactions to stress or crises. What may be warning signs are the **degree** and/or **duration** of the new behavior. **Degree** refers to how significant or "bad" the behavior is, i.e. is it interfering with your child's ability to function—to eat, sleep, go to school, play? **Duration** refers to how long the behavior lasts. Stress behaviors should lessen in severity as time passes. If your child's behavior does not improve or return to normal after several weeks or months, parents should seek help from a professional, such as the child's pediatrician, a counselor, or a therapist.

The following information describes "typical" reactions and how parents can help their children cope:

Birth to 3 Years

Child's reaction:

- More crying and may have problems eating/sleeping.
- Possible regression to earlier behaviors such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, temper tantrums, or attachment to articles such as a blanket.
- Aggressive behavior toward siblings and other children.

What parents can do:

- When possible, both parents should have frequent contact with young children.
- Use puppets, drawing, toys, and stories to tell your children about parental separation.
- Have transition objects when going from one parent to another; something belonging to Dad when child goes to Mom and something of Mom's when child goes to Dad's home.
- Make use of phone calls and videos, such as FaceTime or Skype, to maintain regular contact in order to promote parent/child bonding.
- Provide stability in care and routine and give cuddling and soothing.

Preschoolers (3 to 6 Years)

Child's reaction:

- Fear of abandonment.
- Grief and regression, such as thumb sucking and bed-wetting.
- Guilt and self blame.
- School problems—separation anxiety.
- “Magical or fantasy” thinking—their “bad” behavior caused the break-up and their “good” behavior can fix things.
- Possessiveness and not wanting to share parents or possessions.
- Worry over basic security needs:
 - Who will take care of me?
 - Will we have enough money for food?
 - If Mom or Dad gets mad at me, will they leave me?

What parents can do:

- Be patient and create an environment that promotes stability, predictability, and a structured routine.
- Reassure your child and let him/her know where you are or how to contact you at all times.
- Listen to your child and dispel fears and misconceptions—parents living apart is not your child's fault.
- Expect some regression—be tolerant and compassionate.
- Read your child books designed to explain separation to young children.

School Age (6 to 10 Years)

Child's reaction:

- Anxiety about abandonment.
- Intense sadness and sense of loss.
- Anger and grief.
- Wishes for reconciliation.
- Stress symptoms such as stomachaches or headaches.
- Slip in school performance, attendance, or attention.
- Ambivalence about what they want and feelings of conflicted loyalty.
- Manipulation (playing one parent against the other).
- Feelings of deprivation.

What parents can do:

- Maintain contact with your child's teacher and counselor.
- Pay attention to your child's relationships with other children.
- Watch for signs of depression.
- Encourage contact and relationships with both parents, grandparents, and other relatives as well as other adults who can serve as role models.
- Listen to and explain feelings to your child.
- Practice effective communication and mutual support with co-parent.
- Determine whether school or community has groups or programs for children of divorce or children and grief/loss.
- Keep your child informed of any potential changes such as a change in residence or in how often the child will be with each parent.

Pre-teenage (10 to 13 Years)

Child's reaction:

- Worry and anxiety over security issues and the future.
- A sense of powerlessness and despair.
- Concerns over money.
- Feeling of rejection.
- Urge to grow up too fast.
- Curiosity about the source of parental conflict.
- Siding with one parent over the other.
- Anger.
- Feeling responsible for younger siblings or even one of the parents.

What parents can do:

- Give child reassurance of parental love.
- Spend one-on-one time with the child.
- Encourage open communication and expression of feelings.
- Give age-appropriate choices and control.
- Avoid involving pre-teens in adult power struggles or decisions.

Teenage (13 to 18 Years)

Child's reaction:

- Worries about money, losing family home, changing schools, etc.
- More “acting out” as an expression of anger (boys tend toward violence; girls turn anger inward—sexuality, eating disorders, depression).
- Anger and blame directed at the perceived “offending” parent.
- Protectiveness towards the “victim” parent and confusion over own (child’s) role.
- Anger or embarrassment over social life of parent.
- Moralistic or judgmental thinking.
- Withdrawal/isolation, moving away from family and relying more on peers.
- Argumentative attitude.
- Risk-taking behavior.
- Escape into drugs/alcohol to dull pain.
- Increased risk for suicide.

What parents can do:

- Let teen know that divorce is not his/her fault.
- Set clear boundaries and limits.
- Encourage many types of positive communication.
- Take a parenting class in order to recognize the difference between “typical” teenage behaviors and extremes.
- Involve teens in empowerment activities that increase self-esteem, such as music lessons or playing sports.
- Find positive role models.
- Stay involved.
 - Network with other parents.
 - Stay in touch with teachers and coaches.
 - Know your child’s friends and activities.
- Have clear expectations for responsible behavior.
- Balance teen’s need for separation and privacy with your need for information and accountability.
- Avoid getting teen involved in parent’s personal issues.
- Consider family counseling.

How Children Feel About Family Violence

Children are significantly affected by the behavior of their parents, especially on-going conflict characterized by yelling and threats. Family violence is both physical and emotional. When children are witnesses to it they often feel:

- Powerless, because they can't stop the violence.
- Guilty, because they think they are responsible for it.
- Angry at the victimized parent for not stopping it.
- Angry at the battering parent for hurting the victimized parent.
- Helpless, feeling that they need to solve the problem, but getting hurt if they intervene.
- Confused when the adults try to get them to take sides.
- Afraid for themselves and everyone in the family.
- Isolated and insecure, making excuses so they don't have to go home, unwilling to bring friends home.
- Dishonest, embarrassed, and guilty for making up excuses for the victimized parent's injuries.
- Overwhelmed by a situation from which they see no escape.

What Children Need and Don't Need

Children need:

- Love and support.
- Reassurance and compassion.
- Boundaries, limits, and guidance.
- Physical and emotional security.
- Positive role models.
- Permission to love both parents unconditionally.
- To be able to be a child and not be pressured to grow up too fast.
- To be told the truth (but maybe not the “whole” truth at once).
- To be prepared for the changes they will face.
- To be told that parental separation is not their fault.
- To grieve and be comforted.
- To have time and contact with both parents.

Children don't need:

- To be put in the middle of their parents' conflict.
- To be used as barter for money, a situation, or anything.
- To be asked to take sides against a parent.
- To be asked whom they want to live with.
- To hear parents put down or criticize each other.
- To be used as a “substitute spouse.”
- To be used as a scapegoat for parental anger or frustration.
- To have too much change too rapidly in too many areas.
- To have presents as a substitute for a parent's presence.
- To feel they must protect or “take care of” their parent.

Financial Responsibilities

As a part of parenting responsibilities, each parent has a duty to support his or her children. This duty is separate from visitation rights. Child support is determined according to the Virginia Schedule of Monthly Basic Child Support Obligation. Child support may be increased or decreased whenever there is a material change in circumstance on the part of the parent or child.

Complying with your financial responsibilities to your child:

- Is providing money for basic needs, including food, clothing, a safe place to live, education, transportation, health care, day care, and recreation (toys or sporting equipment).
- Is **not** using money to manipulate the child to appear to be the “better” parent or involving the child in financial discussions or transactions regarding support.

Money can trigger many emotions. Parents should keep children out of the middle of money issues, but should be honest about the change of circumstance in the family and its impact on family finances. Parents need to balance reassuring children that their needs will be met against the reality of doing without some of the “extras” such as vacations and other discretionary items.

It is often the unexpected expenses that create the greatest stress and conflict, such as an unexpected car or housing expense, illness, or even school pictures or birthday parties. Parents should make responsible handling of finances a priority so that the needs of children can be met.

Co-Parenting and Parallel Parenting

Warm, caring, nurturing parenting can help children adjust to the changing family structure during separation and/or divorce. The reality is, however, that many parents are so overwhelmed by their own emotions and by financial and legal issues that their parenting suffers just at the time when it is needed most by the children.

Just about everything we do as parent's falls under one of these categories:

- Provide—support, education, guidance
- Protect—safety, health, and well-being
- Prepare—for an independent life as an adult

It is undisputed that family change and crises can have a negative effect on the couple relationship, leading to problems in parenting together. Parents may be more effective if they adopt a “business-like” approach to parenting, focusing on the goal of raising a child to be a happy, healthy adult while keeping their communication goal-directed and respectful. There are two models of parenting that can be effective in parenting from separate homes. One is **parallel parenting**, the other is **cooperative co-parenting**.

Cooperative co-parenting involves joint communication and decision-making on issues regarding the child. Parents “problem-solve” and negotiate differences, while focusing on the best interests of the child. They support each other’s parenting role, while respecting the boundaries of each other’s home. They work together to make “child-focused” decisions regarding issues such as health care, education, religion, rules, and values.

There may be situations or issues that make cooperative co-parenting difficult or even inappropriate. In those situations, **parallel parenting** may be a more effective model. Some indicators for parallel parenting may be:

- A high degree of conflict and an inability to communicate.
- Intense anger or feelings of betrayal due to infidelity.
- Geographical distance—co-parent is out of the state or out of the U.S.
- Incarceration.
- Mental health issues.
- Substance abuse.
- History of family violence and/or protective order.
- Bitterness due to contested child custody issues.

In **parallel parenting**, parents must disengage from each other emotionally and physically. Each parent essentially parents “on his own” without the frequent communication and decision-making of cooperative co-parenting. Communication with the other parent is child-focused, specific, and rarely in person. It is most often by letter, phone, e-mail, or through professionals.

Some parents begin with parallel parenting in the early stages of separation and gradually evolve to a more cooperative approach as the anger and other strong emotions subside. Some stay in the parallel parenting model because it is most appropriate for their family’s needs.

The cooperative co-parenting approach affords the greatest joint influence on the children because both parents are co-parenting and making decisions together. Thus children continue to benefit from the influence of both Mom and Dad.

Some common challenges in parenting from separate homes are when parents have different styles of parenting, different rules, and different approaches to household responsibilities or chores. When parents find that they have different parenting styles, arguing about it is not helpful. **The conflict over parenting styles is more damaging than the inconsistencies between parents.**

Whether in the parallel or cooperative co-parenting model, parental communication is most effective when it is child-focused and respectful. Parents must avoid the verbal “put-downs,” or disparaging, critical comments about or to each other. It is not helpful to the parents and is harmful to the children. Additionally, it is the responsibility of both parents to caution their friends and extended family to avoid negative comments about the other parent in the child’s presence.

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles are standards or sets of strategies that a parent uses in bringing up a child. Most parents learn their parenting practices from their own parents—some they replicate with their children, some they discard. Other factors influencing a parent's approach to parenting include their culture, education, faith, age/experience, peers, and the temperament of both parent and child.

One of the best known parenting style theories was developed by Diane Baumrind, who stated that parents fall into one of three categories:

- Authoritarian (or autocratic)—telling children what to do with no choices.
- Permissive—allowing children to do what they wish.
- Authoritative—providing children with rules and guidance with choices and consequences.

What follows is a brief description of five parenting styles, including the three styles listed above, with parental behaviors and the possible reactions of children.

High Demand

Parental behaviors:

- High standards demanded.
- Emphasis on achievement in areas important to the parent, usually academic, athletic, artistic.
- Discipline by yelling, name-calling, physical punishment.

What you might see in the child:

- Stress.
- Lack of being well-rounded.
- Excellence at a cost of self-determination and personal happiness.

Authoritarian (autocratic): “Limits Without Freedom”

Parental behaviors:

- Parent imposes authority (high level of control).
- No choices.
- Conformity.
- Obedience is demanded.
- Respect demanded through fear.
- Power.
- Criticism.
- “You will do it because I am the parent and I told you to.”

What you might see in the child:

- Rebellion.
- Sneaky, “behind the back” behavior.
- Lack of initiative or critical thinking skills.
- Fear of parent.

Permissive: “Freedom Without Limits”

Parental behaviors:

- Little parental leadership.
- Lack of order.
- Inconsistencies.
- Many choices and personal freedom.
- Self-regulation.
- Few limits, rules, or boundaries.
- “Hands-off” parenting philosophy.
- You can do what you wish.

What you might see in the child:

- Out of control behavior due to not knowing the behavior that is expected.
- Social insecurity.
- Confusion over lack of structure in the home versus rules outside the home.
- Feeling unprotected or even unloved.

Authoritative: “Freedom Within Limits”

Parental behaviors:

- Parents provide guidance.
- Positive discipline (firmness with dignity).
- Personal responsibility.
- Enhanced parent/child communication.
- Mutual respect.
- Self-discipline.
- Cooperation.
- Choices and consequences.

What you might see in the child:

- Confidence.
- Competence.
- Secure attachment with trust and respect.
- Higher level of social/emotional intelligence.

Uninvolved

Parental behaviors:

- Unresponsive
- Neglectful
- Disengaged

What you might see in the child:

- Anxiety and depression.
- Feelings of rejection or abandonment.
- Feeling responsible for the parental lack of involvement.

In **cooperative co-parenting**, parents might try to focus on their shared goals for bringing up their child and discuss strategies and techniques that will foster success in reaching those goals. If parents cannot agree on a common approach, then “agreeing to disagree” may be the most respectful way to resolve their differences.

In **parallel parenting**, the differences in styles is less of an issue because the parents are largely parenting “on their own,” independent of each other.

Discipline

Discipline	vs.	Punishment
1. "Discipline" comes from the Latin word "disciplina" which means "to teach, or to follow the teaching of another."		1. "Punishment" comes from the Latin word "punier," which means "to inflict penalty or pain."
2. Discipline and guidance are sets of attitudes and methods that adults use to help children develop self-control and follow rules.		2. Punishment involves power and authority and demands obedience.
3. Discipline is something adults do with children.		3. Punishment is something adults do to children.
4. Discipline is preventive.		4. Punishment is reactive.

When parents practice loving guidance and positive discipline techniques, children learn to use their own resources as they grow into responsible adults.

Positive discipline is about building relationships and trust. It is having children do what you want them to do because they want to do it—not just because they are afraid of punishment.

It is okay to have different rules in Mom's house and Dad's house as long as the rules are carefully articulated to the child. The child must know what is expected from him/her. Linking the rules to what is in the child's long term best interest makes it easier for him/her to understand and comply with your expectations.

Household Responsibilities

Giving children household responsibilities or chores enhances their life skills, sense of teamwork, and appreciation of what they have. It also fosters responsibility, accountability, and time management. Chores can contribute to greater self-esteem (a sense of competence and confidence) and can add to a child's resiliency in the face of adversity. Having chores at both Mom's house and Dad's house can help "normalize" these expectations and make them seem less punitive.

2-3 years old

- Pick up toys and put them away. *(Some guidance may be needed.)*
- Put their trash in the trash can. *(For example, if they wipe their nose, you can tell them to put the dirty tissue in the trash. Be careful; they will also put other things in the trash that do not belong there.)*
- Undress and dress with some help.

4 years old

- Put unbreakable groceries and non-toxic household items away on low shelves.
- Dust furniture.
- Get the mail.
- Prepare cold cereal. *(Place milk in a small pitcher to make it easier for the child to pour.)*

5 years old

- Set the table, putting plates and napkins in the correct places. *(They might mix up the silverware, but it doesn't need to be perfect.)*
- Make a simple sandwich.
- Feed their pet.
- Fold and put their clothing away in drawers.
- Pour their own drink.
- Learn to tie shoes.

6 years old

- Water plants and flowers.
- Hang up their clothes in the closet.
- Put a band-aid on a small cut.

7 years old

- Carry groceries if they are not too heavy.
- Leave the bathroom in order. Dry area and hang up towels.
- Keep their room neat.

8-9 years old

(At this age children should begin doing chores without constant reminders.)

- Mop the floor.
- Wash dishes or load and unload the dishwasher.
- Do simple yard work such as raking leaves.

10-12 years old

- Change and make their bed.
- Earn their own money through some odd jobs outside the house.
- Vacuum.
- Walk pets.

Teen Years

- Baby-sit.
- Do general house and yard work.
- Do laundry and ironing.
- Cook.
- Run errands in car, if old enough.

Children's Self-Esteem and Resiliency

Self-esteem is how we feel about our basic self-worth and what we think about ourselves (self-concept). True self-esteem is the combination of competence and confidence. It comes to us through mastery—learning a new skill, doing well in a task. With each new skill learned, we feel more self-confident, and our over-all feeling of self-worth is enhanced.

The most important factor in influencing a child's self-esteem is the relationship with a parent or primary caregiver. If a child feels safe, loved, and accepted for who he or she is, then self-esteem is enhanced. If a child feels rejected or physically, emotionally, or sexually abused, then that goes to the core of how the child perceives himself/herself. Other factors may influence a child's self-esteem such as how well he/she achieves in school, performs in large-motor activities, or is accepted by others (how well others like and react to the behavior of the child).

Resiliency is the ability to recover from or adjust to change or misfortune. Children who are resilient tend to have high self-esteem and are able to recover from disruption in their lives. The skills and attitudes that help children to be resilient are enhanced by their self-concept and sense of empowerment.

Children with true self-esteem and resiliency tend to:

- Act independently and are less prone to peer pressure.
- Assume responsibility for their actions and not blame others.
- Take pride in their accomplishments without depending on external rewards.
- Tolerate frustration and not expect perfection.
- Attempt new tasks and challenges without fear of failure.
- Handle positive and negative emotions appropriately.
- Be emphatic and supportive of others.
- Value and respect differences.
- Get along well with others.
- Believe they have some influence over what happens in their life.

Parents can enhance their children's self-esteem and resiliency by:

- Offering genuine encouragement.
- Seeing challenges and obstacles as necessary to foster flexibility, resilience, competence, and perseverance in their children.
- Acknowledging and accepting their child's positive and negative feelings.
- Seeing their child's mistakes as learning experiences rather than failures.
- Focusing on the behavior, not the child.
- Creating and practicing mutual respect.
- Providing effective discipline and structure.
- Offering choices and setting rules.
- Providing experiences that build knowledge, skills, and character.
- Encouraging the child to stretch and grow.
- Expecting and accepting differences.

Remember that although parents are not the only influence on their child's self-esteem and resiliency, they are the most important.

Communication

Behaviors that interfere with effective parental communication:

- Talking without listening.
- Making assumptions or expecting the other parent to be a mind reader.
- Letting negative emotions influence what and how information is shared.

To promote better parental communication:

- Keep communication child-focused. Shift the focus from each other to the child or children.
- Understand both the purpose and content of the communication.
- Keep egos out of it.
- Avoid remarks that provoke anger or conflict.
- If a conflict exists, try to problem-solve and negotiate instead of argue.
- Politely terminate conflicted or unproductive communication.
- Apologize when it is warranted and accept responsibility for your part of the conflict.
- Seek common ground and be solution-focused instead of problem-focused.
- Seek another opinion or professional help in improving communication.

Adapted from: the *Co-Parenting Survival Guide* by Elizabeth S. Thayer, Ph.D.

Points to Remember for Successful Communication

- Your body language influences how your words will be received.
- Decide what is important and stress it; decide what is unimportant and forget it.
- Try to stay positive. Whenever possible, state what you do want, not what you don't.
- Keep your message specific.
- Try to see the situation from the other person's perspective.
- Avoid using words like "you always" and "you never."
- Stick to the issue(s) at hand; don't dredge up things from the past.
- Be aware of how you say things (tone, body language, etc.) and how it affects the other person.
- Use humor when appropriate, as long as it is not at the other person's expense.
- Focus on what the speaker is saying rather than how you are going to respond.
- For clarification, restate what you heard.
- Don't give mixed messages—don't say "yes" when you really mean "no."
- Don't expect others to be able to read your mind. If you don't tell them how you feel, they can't be expected to guess.
- Be friendly but firm; when you lose control, it puts the other person in a position of power. You may need to come back to the issue at another time.
- It's OK to say, "I can't deal with this right now. Let's discuss it when we are calmer."
- Focus on the deed (behavior), not the doer (person).
- Listen to what the other person has to say (without interruption) before you respond.
- If you feel that there has been a miscommunication or misunderstanding, these are some useful phrases.
 - I'm sorry if what I said/did offended you; that was not my intention.
 - I can see that you're upset; what can I do?
 - I'm sorry you're feeling that way (i.e. hurt, angry, mistreated).
 - Thank you for sharing how you actually (or honestly) feel; I hadn't realized that.
 - That has not been my experience; what in your experience has led you to feel that way?
 - Help me understand...

Material drawn from: *Getting It Together for Employed Parents*, Iowa State University and U.S.A.D.A.

Active Listening

- Listen for and repeat speaker's main points.
- Listen for and acknowledge speaker's feelings.
- Use appropriate body language/non verbal communication:
 - Look interested.
 - Maintain eye contact.
 - Nod your head.
 - Lean forward.
 - Smile.
- Use welcoming words:
 - "Tell me about it."
 - "I'd like to hear more about it."
- Ask open-ended questions that:
 - Cannot be answered by "yes" or "no."
 - Show interest in learning the whole story.
- Reframe (soften) speaker's negative words:
 - Change negative language to neutral language.
 - Be truthful.
 - Help speaker and listener see problem, not position.
- Don't:
 - Interrupt.
 - Deny feelings ("You don't really feel furious.")
 - Act hostile.
 - Be judgmental.
 - Blame or accuse.

Managing Your Anger

Bottling up anger can create health problems. Venting anger can wreak havoc on relationships and can have adverse health consequences as well. The following tips may help you resolve your anger in a positive way:

Be aware of patterns—anger is a choice and can become a habit.

Be aware of the “dance of anger.” When one person changes the “steps,” the interaction will be different.

Respond, don’t react.

Take time to think about how you want to deal with the situation. A more thoughtful response will usually be more effective than an angry outburst.

Don’t confront or blame.

Use “I” statements to express how you feel. Saying “This is all your fault” is unproductive. Instead, take responsibility for your own feelings; for example: “I feel sad because I thought we could work out the problem.”

Watch out for “should.”

Often we get angry because people don’t act like we think they should act, or because situations don’t happen the way we think they should. Anger usually dissolves if we realize that our expectations may be unrealistic.

Identify hidden feelings.

Anger is seldom a primary emotion. It usually stems from other, unresolved feelings or issues. Try to uncover any hidden feelings or issues that may have precipitated the anger.

Reframe the situation.

Instead of bottling up or blowing up when something makes you angry, take a moment to see the situation from another perspective. If you can tell yourself that the source of your anger was unintentional or not a personal affront, you may be able to let it go. Try to be empathetic rather than judgmental.

Exercise.

The physiological response to stress (tightened muscles, pounding heart, excess adrenaline, etc.) can be dissipated through brisk exercise. Physical exercise releases a chemical in the brain called serotonin, which produces a sense of calm.

Discuss it.

Exploring the problem and possible solutions is the key to constructively resolving the issues at hand. Focus your energy on problem solving rather than arguing. Always seek win-win solutions.

Recognizing and Managing Your Child's Anger

- A child's anger is often a cover for feelings of hurt, fear, or sadness.
- A child may be unable or unwilling to tell you the source of the anger or fear.
- Children direct their anger toward the people closest to them.
- When your child seems angry, stay with him or her, and learn what you can do about the situation.
- Listen to your child non-judgmentally and empathetically.
- Don't allow your child to destroy valuables or hurt anyone.
- Resist the temptation to react or become angry yourself.
- Avoid responding with a lecture or criticism.
- Don't try to squelch the anger; instead, try to get the child to explore causes and options for problem solving.
- Help direct strong feelings into other activities such as physical exercise, music, or hobbies.
- If the anger is severe or prolonged, seek counseling.

Issues That May “Trigger” Conflict

Be aware of issues or situations that can lead to conflict. Remember the expression “forewarned is forearmed.” Arm yourself with your best peacekeeping strategies in order to avoid problems. Some “red flags” include:

- Your co-parent’s personal habits (drinking, cussing, speeding, drug use, etc.)
- Arrangements for dropping off and picking up children.
- The transition from Mom’s house to Dad’s house and back.
- Changes in time or date of visitations or holidays.
- Changes in major areas—residence, companions, school, job/income, support, remarriage, etc.
- Special dates—anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays.
- Parents’ attendance at school and recreational events.
- Sharing of children’s toys and clothes between the two homes.
- Money issues—support, education, unexpected expenses.
- Handling children’s refusal to visit.
- Emergencies.
- Parenting styles and standards or inflexibility.
- Phone calls.
- Religion.
- Education—selection and cost of schools, day care, and school records.
- Medical expenses.
- Teenage years and all the issues involved.
- Vacation plans.
- Taking children outside the U.S.
- Grandparents and other relatives.
- Risk taking and safety issues.
- Boundaries, limits, rules.

Conflict Prevention

It has been said that fear is the “mother” of anger. Separating and divorcing parents experience many fears and losses, including: loss of love, loss of a child, loss of respect, loss of money, loss of status, loss of reputation, loss of material things, and many individualized fears. In this state of mind, many couples go from a positive attachment in the couple relationship to a negative attachment (arguing, blaming, showing disrespect, having negative assumptions), instead of switching their focus to their children. Some parents, in an effort to avoid conflict, may leave their children as well as their co-parent.

Children need a secure attachment to both parents. Children need to feel safe in order to love and be loved. When parents draw children into their conflict, whether intentionally or unknowingly, it threatens the children’s sense of trust and security. When children are caught in the middle of their parents’ conflict, they experience many feelings—confusion, anger, fear, sadness, disloyalty, and discomfort.

Do your best to be aware of how your co-parenting relationship impacts your children. Strive for effective communication to reduce conflict and its consequences.

Don’t use your child as a:

- Messenger between you and your co-parent.
- Spy on your co-parent or others.
- Confidant or companion.
- Peacemaker or warrior.

Anger is a natural part of the grief process. Anger and conflict are to be expected in a separation/divorce, or in child custody issues. However, conflict doesn’t have to be destructive. It can be the catalyst for positive change.

The following strategies are useful for both preventing and reducing conflict between co-parents:

- Treat each other with respect (even if you don’t feel it). Do it for your child. Respectful, assertive communication may prevent conflict. Often when we are angry, we lash out with blame and accusations, such as, “You make me so angry when you are constantly late. I think you are trying to wreck my schedule.”
- Restructuring the sentence from a “You” message to an “I” message is one way to express frustration without making the other person feel attacked or blamed.

The structure of an “I” message is:

*“I feel... state your feeling
when you... state what the person does or doesn’t do
because...” state your reason*

Then state or ask for what you need in order for the issue to be resolved.

- “I” messages are useful if you are preserving an emotional connection or friendship, but may be **less effective with individuals who are not concerned about your feelings**. Instead, use assertive communication, such as, “Please be on time to pick up the kids on Friday. We agreed that you would pick them up at 6:00 p.m. I make plans for myself on Friday evenings based on that agreed upon time. If you arrive after 6:00, the children and I may not be there. If 6:00 is no longer a workable time for you, we may need to renegotiate this.”
- Assertive communication lets the person know what you need without using hostile or attacking language.
- “I” messages are also not appropriate to use with children. Assertively tell them what you want or don’t want, such as, “Do not speak to me with that tone of voice. It is disrespectful and rude. I do not want you to feel that it is acceptable to speak to an adult in that manner.”
- Switch the focus of communication from being on each other (as it was in the couple relationship) to focusing on the children.
- Adopt a “business-like” approach to co-parenting using strategies that will positively “grow” your child into a happy, healthy adult.
- Practice active, non-judgmental listening.
- Be open to seeing things from the other parent’s perspective.
- Brainstorm for solutions that result in synergy—incorporating some points that are important to Mom and some that are important to Dad.
- Practice anger management techniques such as the stop, look, and listen approach when dealing with conflict.

Stop, Look, and Listen:

STOP arguing

LOOK for mutually acceptable ways of resolving the problem

LISTEN without interrupting, for emotion and unstated concerns

- Manage your anger so that you can respond with problem solving rather than personal attacks.

Conflict Resolution

Effective management of conflict comes from:

- Identifying and understanding root causes of conflict.
- Recognizing styles of handling conflict.
- Exploring needs and differences.
- Working toward constructive resolution of the conflict.
- Fighting **FAIR**
 - Focusing on issues.
 - Avoiding blaming.
 - Identifying win/win solutions.
 - Respecting each other's perspectives.

Effective and constructive conflict management must support the needs of the individuals involved.

"Resolving conflict is rarely about who is right. It is about acknowledgement and appreciation of differences."

Thomas F. Crum, author of: *The Magic of Conflict*

Options for Conflict Resolution

Negotiation is a dialogue between parents intended to reach an understanding or resolve differences that will produce an agreed upon course of action. The goal of negotiation is compromise.

Helpful steps in negotiation:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Identify short- and long-term goals for resolution.
3. Fully listen to each other's goals and positions.
4. Brainstorm a resolution that will incorporate the goals and resolutions of both parents, leading to synergy.

Mediation is a voluntary method of dispute resolution using a neutral third party to facilitate problem solving. If the parents reach an agreement, a mediator draws up an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) that can be taken to court and signed by a judge, making it a court order. Mediation:

- Is usually faster than going to court,
- Empowers the parents to find solutions that will work best for their family,
- Is less damaging to the co-parenting relationship, and
- Is less expensive than litigation.

Attending a parenting seminar prior to mediation often enables parents to create a more equitable, child-focused parenting agreement.

Collaborative Law is a process in which a couple works as a team with their lawyers to resolve their issues and develop a parenting plan. Their attorneys agree to collaborate in four-way conferences rather than litigating. Child custody evaluators and financial planners are often brought in to assist in the collaboration.

Litigation is the process of filing in court for a judge to decide the issues. Often an attorney advocates for one party against the other. Expert witnesses frequently testify as do friends and others who know the parents. In litigation, a judge, not the parents, makes the final determination of what is in the best interests of the child. Litigation is more expensive than other alternatives and, as an adversarial process, often leaves parents bitter and dissatisfied with the outcome.

Parenting Coordinators are mental health professionals or certified family mediators who assist high conflict parents in communicating with each other. The objective is to help them resolve disputes in the best interests of their children.

If anger and conflict are prolonged, and especially if there is family violence, counseling and/or anger management classes may be useful.

Long-Distance Parenting

Long-distance parenting is one of the most difficult challenges facing divorced or never-married parents and their children. Parents fear losing the relationship with their child, and children often feel that they are not loved by the parent who is at a distance. Frequent communication can help foster a positive relationship. Below are some tips to help accomplish that.

Tips for the Parent at a Distance

- Use a variety of ways to communicate, such as letters, phone calls, e-mail, text messages, Skype, Face Time or other videoconferencing, and e-cards.
- Depending on the age of the child, you might communicate using Twitter or Facebook.
- Send care packages.
- Learn about your child's interests and develop communication around those interests.
- Play on-line games with each other.
- Share photos.
- Give your child a "virtual" tour of your home, office, or community.
- Send your child self-addressed envelopes of different sizes so he or she can share material by mail with you.

Tips for the Parent Living with the Child

- Avoid interfering with your child's communication with the other parent.
- Encourage frequent communication and a positive relationship.
- Avoid getting involved in disagreements between your child and the other parent.
- Share information (school, sports, health, etc.) about your child with the other parent.

Never Married Parents

What is Paternity?

Paternity is legal parenthood. Unless acknowledged by the father at the time of a child's birth, paternity is established by the court through genetic testing.

Paternity carries with it legal rights and responsibilities. Legal paternity requires child support, but can also grant rights of visitation and/or custody as well as the rights of a child to inherit property from the father's estate.

Establishing Paternity in Virginia¹

To establish paternity in Virginia, one of the following must file a sworn petition with the Juvenile or Circuit Court (only if there is another related matter pending before the Circuit Court) where the child lives:

- A child.
- A parent.
- The person with legal custody of the child.
- An appropriate state representative.

Because of the parents' conflict of interest, neither parent may represent the child as guardian or otherwise. The court, therefore, may appoint a *guardian ad litem* (attorney paid by the court) to represent a child under 18 years of age.

The following are presumed to establish paternity, unless there is evidence to the contrary:

- A written statement of parenthood acknowledged by the father under oath in front of a notary public;
- Genetic blood testing that shows at least 98% probability that a man is the child's father (the court can order that the alleged father and the child submit to a blood test);
- Proof of a lawful adoption; or
- The child was born to a man and woman married to each other.

Other actions by the alleged father may also be sufficient to determine paternity. These actions include:

- Openly living with the mother at the time of conception,
- The father's public statement to others that he is the father of the child,
- Allowing the child to use his last name,
- Financially supporting the child, or
- Claiming the child as a dependent for public assistance or tax purposes.

¹Excerpted from: "Understanding Your Domestic Rights in Virginia" ©2009. Metropolitan Richmond Women's Bar Association. Used with permission.

Never Married Parents: Legal Rights and Responsibilities

- Mom can have only her name on the birth certificate until paternity is established.
- Unmarried parents may have both names on the birth certificate if paternity is acknowledged at the hospital at the time of birth or by genetic testing following the birth.
- If an unmarried father has established paternity, the mother may not put the child up for adoption without the father's consent.
- If there is no acknowledgment or determination of paternity, the father has no legal rights and no obligations to provide support.
- If a man believes he is the father of a baby being carried by a woman he had relations with and would like to have a role in the child's life, he should contact the state Putative Father Registry:
 - This is a database where a man can register his name, the mother's name, and the child's date of birth or approximate due date.
 - Registering in this way prevents the mother from putting the child up for adoption without the father's consent.
 - If the father does nothing and the mother does not list the father on the birth certificate, the father has no role in the adoption process and the father's consent is not required.

Source: http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/ap/putative_fatherhood.html

Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren is not a new phenomenon, but according to the U.S. Census Bureau it has been increasing steadily since 1990. A number of factors have contributed to this increase:

- Parental abandonment.
- Parental mental or physical illness.
- Economic hardship.
- Divorce.
- Domestic violence.
- Substance abuse.
- Incarceration.
- Deployment.
- Parental death.

Whether permanent or temporary, custodial grandparents will face many challenges:

- Discipline issues.
- New issues that did not exist when they were originally parenting, such as internet, cyber bullying, etc.
- Financial concerns.
- Legal issues.
- Stress over new role.

The following are some tips for custodial grandparents:

- Help grandchildren adjust to life in your home by setting clear rules and consistent consequences.
- Set daily routines, such as mealtime, bedtime, time with friends, etc. so kids will have structure and predictability.
- Help them design their personal space so that they feel “at home”.
- Get involved in their school and create a quiet space for homework.
- Research extracurricular activities, such as sports, music lessons, scouting, or other clubs.
- Take a class to update parenting skills and network with other grandparents.
- Become computer savvy.
- Identify resources, such as AARP or local kinship support.

New Relationships and Your Children

Relationships that parents have with others (family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc.) impact children in many ways. These relationships serve as a model, provide a network and support system, and teach children about a variety of interactions.

One relationship that has significant impact occurs when one parent enters into a new significant relationship with another person.

Some things to keep in mind:

- Give yourself, your former partner, and your children time to grieve before entering into another relationship.
- Don't involve children with a new person until the relationship is steady and serious. Casual relationships may be confusing to young children and may impact their sense of trust, security, and ability to attach emotionally.
- Don't encourage children to keep secrets about your relationships. It puts them in the middle of conflicting loyalties between parents.
- Understand that your new relationship may trigger resentment, grief, or anger on the part of your children and former partner. Be patient and empathetic.
- Understand that your children's reaction may depend on their developmental stages.
- Assure your children that a new relationship is not "replacing" their parent.
- Help the new person in your life relate positively to your children.
- Do not abandon your children emotionally.
- Avoid sexual activity when children are in your care until after remarriage.

Children benefit from the love and guidance of many people: stepparents and extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. As long as conflict and divided loyalties can be kept at a minimum, these relationships can be enriching and can enhance a child's development.

Other relationships that can help children grow include those with:

- Teachers
- Coaches
- Religious leaders
- Tutors/mentors
- Neighbors
- Employers

Stress Management

Anger and chronic stress can take quite a toll on the body. Stress management is a must when going through a crisis or family stress. The following techniques can help break the “fight or flight” response that causes muscle tension in the body:

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Lie down or sit on a firm, comfortable surface.
- Tense all your muscles.
- Hold the tension for 20 seconds.
- Notice the feeling of tightness.
- Relax all your muscles on a long exhale or breath.
- Notice the feeling of relaxation.
- Beginning at your feet, tense each muscle group for 20 seconds and then release.
- Notice the difference between when the muscles are tense and when they are relaxed.
- Continue through your legs, hips, buttocks, stomach, chest, back, hands, arms, shoulders, forehead, eyes, and mouth.
- Tighten your whole body on an inhale and relax your whole body on a long exhale.
- Enjoy the calm of your relaxed body.

Deep Breathing (5 minutes)

- Select a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes and direct your attention to your own breathing process.
- Think about nothing but your breath as it flows in and out of your body.
- Continue to focus on your breath as it flows in and out, in and out, thinking of nothing but the smooth, rhythmic process of your own breathing.
- After five minutes, stand up, stretch, smile, and continue with your daily activities.

Additional Stress Management Strategies

- Aerobic exercise
- Sports
- Participating in a support group
- Yoga or other stretching exercises
- Walking or running
- Guided imagery
- Meditation

Legal Terms

CHINS petition – “children in need of services” usually from social service agencies to assure the health and welfare of children.

Contempt – violation of a court order. If a person is found to be “in contempt” of a court order, he/she may be sanctioned, fined, or even imprisoned.

Court appointed special advocate (CASA) – a trained volunteer who represents the interests of a child in a court proceeding.

Custody

Joint legal custody – parents share in the major decision-making regarding their children.

Joint physical custody – children spend time with both parents on a more equitable time schedule.

Legal custody – parents’ legal responsibility for their children, particularly the authority to make major decisions about their children’s lives.

Physical custody – where children will live and according to what schedule.

Sole legal custody – one parent has the sole right and responsibility for making major decisions about a child’s life.

Sole physical custody – children spend the majority of their time with one parent.

Custody evaluation – an investigation by a mental health professional who evaluates parents and makes recommendations to the court about how children should be reared following parental separation/divorce.

Guardian ad litem – a lawyer appointed by the court to defend or represent the interest of a minor child in a court proceeding.

Mediation – a voluntary, confidential process of dispute resolution in which an impartial third party helps people in conflict find a mutually acceptable solution to their dispute.

Parenting coordinator – a mental health professional or certified family mediator who has limited arbitration authority to help high conflict parents resolve disputes and comply with court ordered agreements.

Paternity – the legal determination of a child’s father.

Pro se divorce – filing for divorce without representation by lawyers. Some courts have kits that lead parties step-by-step in filing papers for a pro se divorce.

Protective order – (a.k.a. restraining order) – an order by the court requiring a person to do (or not to do) something. For example, a person can be ordered to have no contact or limited contact with a named person or children. The court can order a person to leave home and stay away for a period of time.

Putative father – the alleged or reputed father of a child born to unmarried parents.

Safe transfer centers – a safe, neutral, and monitored environment where parents can exchange children for visitation.

Separation agreement – a document outlining how a couple will manage their period of separation before a divorce is final. It may detail legal/physical custody of children, child support, alimony, and property division.

Show cause hearing – a court hearing to determine why a person has failed to comply with a court order.

Supervised visitation – the requirement that another adult be present when a parent has visitation with his/her child.

Subpoena – a form issued by the courts requiring a witness to appear in court and/or bring documents.

Summons – a form issued by the court requiring a party to appear in court.

