



Families ... generations of strength

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Making Joint Custody Work

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In order to make joint custody work, parents must work hard to always put the best interests of the children first. Co-parenting after divorce takes a great deal of commitment and effort. Parents must develop a cooperative, respectful environment in which to share the raising of their child when their real desire may be to sever all ties with their former spouse. Parents sharing joint custody have a difficult road ahead of them with potential roadblocks and unexpected turns along the way. Developing a successful co-parental relationship can be very rewarding for everyone involved. However, in order for joint custody to work, parents must consider several issues and develop strategies for successfully negotiating these issues — guidance and discipline, respecting each other, keeping children out of the middle, participating in children's lives, gift giving, and school issues.

Guidance and Discipline

Often after a divorce parents will either become more strict or more lenient. Some parents feel like the other parent is letting the child get away with everything; therefore, they attempt to enforce discipline across both homes. Other parents do not want to spend the limited time they have with their child punishing them and tend to be too lenient. It can be difficult for children when their parents have drastically different rules and expectations. Parents should keep the expectations similar to how they were before the divorce or separation in order to give the child a sense of stability and security.

Parents should discuss their preferences for discipline to see if there is an opportunity for consistency across households. Every parent will have different ideas on things like bedtimes, homework, and chores. If both parents can not agree on guidelines, they need to agree to disagree. Set clear expectations for the child at each home. Explain to the child that there are certain rules at mom's house and certain rules at dad's house (Cohen, 1991, pp. 39-41).

Respecting One Another

Parents put down each other for a number of reasons including the following — fear of losing their child to the other parent, anger left over from the relationship with the other parent, and defenses against put downs by the other parent. Parents should never put down each other in front of the child or allow friends or family members to put down the other parent in front of the child. This could negatively affect the child's relationship with both parents (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 46-48).

Sometimes children will put down one parent in front of the other in order to seek more attention from each. For example, the child may come home and tell her father that mom made her clean her room before she could play. Other children will manipulate parents to get what they want. Parents can combat this behavior by realizing that children often exaggerate, developing a sense of trust in the other parent, and communicating better with the other parent (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 40-41).

Participating in Your Child's Life

Both parents should try to attend the child's activities, even if it is not that parent's day with the child. Parents should try to be polite and civil to one another — putting aside their feelings of anger and resentment in order to celebrate important events with their child (Kline & Pew, 1992, pp. 95-96). Many parents unconsciously try to interfere with the other parent's visitation by over-scheduling their child in activities. Visitation with both parents should be the most important priority. Some flexibility should be considered in order for the child to be able to participate in activities, but beware of over-scheduling the child (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 52-54).

Gift Giving

Gift giving can be very hard for parents who had a bitter break up. The parent may have a hard time seeing their child excitedly open a gift or talk about the fantastic gift they got from the other parent. It can also be very difficult for a parent to take the child shopping for a gift for the other parent. However, if the parent does not take the child shopping, probably no one else will. This makes the child feel bad for not having a gift for their parent. Gift giving should be viewed as loving exchanges between the parent and child. A parent can share in the child's excitement by playing with the toy with them. Some parents try to put restrictions on the child's gifts; however, it is the child's possession if it is a gift (Shapiro, 1989, pp. 35-37). Instead of restricting a child from taking a gift with them to the other parent's house, it should be thought of as a compliment (the child viewed that gift as special) (Logrippo, 1994, p. 17).

School Issues

Communication with the school can be difficult for divorced families. Parents can take some simple steps to make this communication easier and to ensure that both parents are receiving information from the school. Parents should inform the school of the situation. Parents can then request that two sets of notices be sent home with the child, or mailed to both parents. Both parents can also request to be included in the directory. Parents should also decide if they will attend conferences together or separately (Cohen, 1991, pp. 63-64).

Summary

More and more children of divorce have parents with joint custody arrangements. Through good communication, cooperation, and support from schools, courts, and other agencies, children growing up in these families can thrive. When both parents learn to put aside their anger and resentment for each other, they can begin to communicate and work together. This will help provide their child with a happy, stable family life.

References

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