Co-Parenting after Divorce:
Opportunities and challenges

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About half of all American children will experience their parents' divorce, and 25% will also face divorce in a parent's second marriage (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). While divorce is often stressful for families, a great deal of variability exists in children's adjustment to divorce. One important factor linked with child outcomes after divorce is the quality of the divorced couple's co-parenting relationship. Research demonstrates that parents' ability to effectively cooperate as co-parents is an important determinant of children's well-being in divorced families, especially when the children are young (Adamsons & Pasley, 2005; Pruett, 2007).

Co-parenting post-divorce

The co-parenting relationship is the relationship that parents share with one another as parents, which is different than their relationship as a married couple. Research suggests that although two people were not able to get along within their intimate relationship, they still may be able to maintain a supportive co-parenting relationship post-divorce (Feinberg, 2003).

Supportive co-parenting within divorced families is characterized by the following: (a) acting together as the "child's team," (b) sharing direct childcare, (c) appropriately managing conflict about the child, and (d) feeling supported in the process of parenting (Pruett & Pruett, 2009). Successful co-parenting requires negotiation, respect, and support. Effective co-parents support one another's actions and decisions, make and stick to agreements about how to raise their children, and refrain from undermining each other.

Evidence suggests that supportive co-parenting is linked with a variety of indicators of children's post-divorce adjustment, including children's pro-social behavior and peer competence (Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). Supportive co-parenting has also been found to predict more frequent father-child contact, which in turn has a strong positive impact on children's development (Sobolewski & King, 2005).

While post-divorce parental cooperation and collaboration are powerful positive forces in child adjustment, negative co-parenting behaviors have been shown to be harmful to children's development. Specifically, children who are exposed to high levels of ongoing parental conflict are at higher risk of various behavioral and emotional problems, as well as more problematic parent-child relationships (McHale et al., 2002).

Another negative co-parenting dynamic is undermining, which is characterized by behaviors such as undercutting, overriding, hostility, criticism, competition, and withdrawal. Undermining behaviors also occur when a parent makes a negative comment or gesture about the other parent in front of the child (for example, mocking, eye rolling, or sighing; Stright & Bales, 2003). High levels of undermining in co-parenting relationships are associated with children's externalizing behaviors (i.e., acting out behaviors) and internalizing behaviors (e.g.,

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anxiety, and depression), as well as children feeling as though they are "caught in the middle" between their parents (Pruett & Donsky, 2011).

The importance of acceptance in negotiating co-parenting styles

After a divorce, each parent needs to understand (and accept) that everything in relation to parenting and childcare responsibilities will not be equal. Prioritizing and focusing on equality does not lead to cooperative and supportive co-parenting (McHale et al., 2002). In fact, parents do not need to share parenting tasks and responsibilities equally in order to achieve a successful co-parenting relationship. Rather, harmonious and effective co-parenting is characterized by parents viewing each other as equally valuable (Pruett & Donsky, 2011).

Additionally, parents need to accept that they cannot control how their former partner behaves, what they say, or what they do. It is not essential that parents do things in the exact same way for children to flourish; there are numerous ways that parents can create family cohesion, consistency, predictability, rules, standards, and safe and secure home environments (McHale et al., 2002). What is critically important, however, is the way parents deal with their differences. Co-parents' acceptance of their parenting differences is associated with better child adjustment post-divorce (Pruett & Donsky, 2011). Moreover, letting go of competition, conflict, and hostility helps parents focus on their shared investment in parenting and create a sense of "teamness."

Developing a quality co-parenting relationship

There are a variety of things parents can do (separately or together) to improve the quality of their co-parenting relationship. For example, parents can focus on maintaining a positive relationship with their former partner for the sake of their children. To do this, parents should commit themselves to exhibiting the supportive co-parenting behaviors linked with positive child outcomes.

Parents should also work hard to recognize the value that each parent brings to their relationship with the child (different skill sets, different backgrounds and life circumstances, etc.), which enriches their child's life.

Additionally, parents should work hard to appropriately manage their differences and resolve conflicts in healthy ways. For example, parents can develop shared agreements with each other regarding key "non-negotiables" they will consistently maintain in their parenting; once these key non-negotiables have been identified, parents should work to let the "little" things go. For example, parents may agree upon mutual standards regarding religious involvement and education, but accept that children be allowed to watch varying amounts of television at each others' homes.

What if joint effort with the other parent is impossible?

While many parents recognize that developing and maintaining a strong co-parenting relationship is important, they may be unable to imagine working on this conjointly with their former partner. However, parents do not necessarily have to work directly with one another to improve the quality of their co-parenting. Given that co-parenting is a relationship of mutual influence, one parent acting independently can still influence the other parent's behavior. Importantly, one parent's efforts to establish a supportive co-parenting relationship will increase the likelihood that the other parent will engage in supportive co-parenting behaviors. For example, if one parent works to support the other parent in a struggle about discipline, he or she is more likely to be afforded that same level of support by the other parent in return. However, this premise can be difficult to maintain when a parent commits to establishing a supportive co-parenting relationship for the sake of the child but becomes frustrated with the other parent's effort. In situations like these, it is important for parents to remind themselves of their primary goal, which is to establish a supportive co-parenting relationship for the sake of their children's

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healthy development and adjustment to the divorce (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004).

Support and resources for families

Because divorce is a stressful experience for families, it can be difficult for many parents to negotiate parenting differences. While co-parenting post-divorce presents a variety of challenges, it is important that parents continue to work to maintain a supportive co-parenting relationship for the sake of their children. Many resources are available to assist parents in this process, including books written specifically for co-parents, support groups, individual therapy, family therapy, parent education, mediation, and parent coordination. Many of these sources of support can help parents understand, manage, and express their feelings in a healthy way, which in turn prevents negative feelings about the divorce from interfering with efforts to establish or maintain a healthy co-parenting relationship. Additionally, these resources can also help decrease parental conflict, limiting the exposure of children to such conflict. Given the strong links between parental conflict and negative child outcomes, including higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Amato & Dorius, 2010), reducing children's exposure to their parents' post-divorce conflict is particularly critical.

Many interventions promote the inclusion of both parents, helping them communicate and work together in ways that support healthy co-parenting relationships and children's well-being.   For example, services like family therapy, parent training, and mediation are designed to strengthen the quality of the co-parenting relationship by helping parents discuss with one another the role that each will play in their child's life, the scope of authority each will have, and the amount of time each parent will spend with their child (Pruett & Barker, 2009). These interventions can also provide parents with the skills necessary to communicate in a collaborative way with one another about their children, make joint decisions, and refrain from arguments (Pruett & Donsky, 2011).

Ultimately, the importance of developing strong, cooperative, and supportive co-parenting relationships is the same for divorced and married parents. Prioritizing supportive co-parenting is vital to the security and well-being of children.

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Dr. Catherine K. Buckley received her doctorate in marriage and family therapy from Purdue University. She also holds a Master's degree in human development and family science with a specialization in early childhood development from The Ohio State University, as well as a second Master's degree in marital and family therapy from Northwestern University. She received her undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Arizona. Dr. Buckley's training and research has focused on the co-parenting relationship and father involvement. Her research has resulted in numerous publications, awards, and presentations at local, national, and international conferences.

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