

Divorce With Children: Achieving Collaborative Shared Parenting with a Plan

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Although shared parenting is preferable, many divorcing couples lack the emotional capacity to have joint custody and shared parenting. With a well-devised parenting plan, many couples who would not otherwise be able to collaborate effectively would be able to do so. When couples divorce, most ex-partners would like to engage in their children's lives actively but struggle to navigate the intricacies and challenges of joint custody and shared parenting. With a plan for collaborative shared parenting, both parents can be actively involved in their children's day-to-day life.

With such an agreement and plan, both parents can cooperatively and actively engage in their children's lives, sharing responsibilities for decision-making and daily parenting tasks. Both parents are involved in significant aspects of their children's upbringing, such as education, healthcare, and extracurricular activities.

Parents must successfully separate their previous marital conflicts from their ongoing parental responsibilities. Cooperative parenting involves respecting each other's parenting styles and authority, ensuring neither parent undermines the other's relationship with the children.

Shared parenting aims to create a healthy and supportive environment for children post-divorce, allowing them to maintain meaningful relationships with both parents. This arrangement is the most desirable outcome for families because it promotes the well-being of children by minimizing inter-parental conflict and fostering a collaborative parenting approach.

Logistics of Cooperative Shared Parenting

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The logistics of cooperative shared parenting rely on structure to ensure a smooth and effective arrangement for both parents and children. Effective logistic planning often involves written agreements that outline the specifics of the parenting plan, including schedules, responsibilities, and communication protocols between parents. This structured approach helps clarify expectations and reduce misunderstandings, benefiting the children involved.

A written parenting agreement facilitates the parenting plan, outlining custody arrangements, including physical and legal custody. It specifies where the child will live, the visitation schedule, and transportation arrangements. It also details decision-making authorities for each parent, including education, healthcare, and other significant issues.

The plan establishes effective communication methods between parents to discuss the children's needs, schedules, and other issues. Communication methods may include weekly phone calls or meetings, texts, emails, co-parenting apps, or shared calendars.

The plan can define how parents make decisions regarding the child's education, healthcare, and other significant matters. Decisions may involve joint decision-making, where parents must agree on important issues. It could also designate specific areas where one parent has more authority.

A parenting plan should be flexible and adaptable, recognizing that circumstances change. Parents should be open to adjusting schedules and arrangements as needed to accommodate the child's needs or unforeseen events. It should also involve an agreement about conflict resolution, including strategies for resolving disputes that may arise.

Agreed-upon conflict resolution methods could involve mediation sessions with a neutral third party when ex-spouses cannot resolve issues directly after addressing disagreements respectfully and constructively.

Support Systems and Regular Reviews

Planning the involvement of support systems is also essential. Encouraging the participation of extended family members or support networks can provide additional stability and support for the child, reinforcing the cooperative parenting model. Like any other problem-solving model, the parenting plan should involve regular reviews and updates. Periodic reviews of the parenting agreement can assess its effectiveness and allow for necessary adjustments based on the child's development and changing family dynamics.

By addressing these logistical components, cooperative shared parenting can create a structured that benefits both parents and children, fostering healthy relationships and minimizing conflict.

Child Welfare as the Top Priority

One of the significant benefits of having a parenting plan is keeping child welfare at the forefront of parents' perspectives. Avoiding putting children in the middle of their parent's emotions is crucial for maintaining a healthy environment for children after separation. Here are several strategies that separated parents can employ to achieve this:

- **Maintain Open Communication:** Parents should communicate openly and respectfully with each other about parenting issues. Collaborative communication includes discussing schedules, decisions, and any concerns regarding the children without involving them in adult conflicts. Keeping communication direct and focused on the children helps minimize misunderstandings and reduces the likelihood of children feeling caught in the middle.
- **Establish Boundaries:** Parents should set clear boundaries regarding what topics to discuss with their children. Children should not be used as messengers or asked to relay information or feelings between parents. Such boundaries help prevent them from feeling responsible for adult emotions or conflicts.
- **Avoid Negative Talk:** Parents should refrain from speaking negatively about each other in front of the children. Examples include avoiding

derogatory comments, criticisms, or blame. Instead, parents should model respect for one another, helping children feel secure in their relationships with both parents.

- **Focusing on the Children's Needs:** Parents should prioritize their children's emotional and psychological well-being. Prioritizing means making decisions based on what is best for the children rather than personal grievances. When parents focus on their children's needs, it helps create a more stable and supportive environment.
- **Seek Professional Support:** If emotions are running high, parents may benefit from seeking the help of a mediator or therapist. Professional support can provide strategies for managing emotions and improving communication, helping parents navigate their relationship in a way that protects their children.
- **Encourage Relationships with Both Parents:** Parents should actively encourage their children to maintain strong relationships with both parents. Encouragement includes supporting the child's time with the other parent and showing enthusiasm for their activities and achievements. Children who feel supported in their relationships are less likely to feel torn between parents.
- **Model Healthy Emotional Expression:** Parents should demonstrate healthy ways to express and manage emotions. Healthy expression includes discussing feelings in an age-appropriate manner and showing children that it's okay to feel sad or upset while teaching them to avoid acting out anger toward the other parent.
- **Have Regular Conversations with the Children:** Regularly check in with the children about their feelings and experiences. Feelings discussions allow parents to gauge how the children are coping and will enable them to express concerns about their parent's relationship, how they fit in, and what the future will look like.

By implementing these strategies, separated/divorced parents can create a more harmonious co-parenting environment that prioritizes the emotional

well-being of their children, helping them navigate the challenges of separation without feeling caught in the middle of their parent's emotions and struggles.

Potential Benefits of Cooperative Shared Parenting

Cooperative shared parenting offers several potential benefits for children and parents following a separation or divorce. These benefits include:

- **Emotional Stability for Children:** Children benefit from maintaining solid and meaningful relationships with both parents. Practical, shared parenting helps minimize feelings of loss and abandonment, providing a sense of security and stability during the transition.
- **Reduced Conflict:** By fostering respectful communication and collaboration, cooperative shared parenting can significantly reduce parental conflict. This creates a more peaceful environment for children, who are less likely to be exposed to parental disputes.
- **Shared Responsibilities:** Parents share the responsibilities of raising their children, which can alleviate the burden on each parent. This shared approach allows for a more balanced distribution of parenting tasks, reducing stress and fatigue for both parents.
- **Positive Role Modeling:** When parents demonstrate cooperation and respect, they model healthy relationship behaviors for their children. Positive modeling can teach children valuable lessons about conflict resolution, communication, and maintaining relationships, even in challenging circumstances.
- **Enhanced Parenting Skills:** Collaborative shared parenting encourages development of communication and problem-solving skills. New skills can lead to improved parenting practices and a better understanding of each other's perspectives and parenting styles.

- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Cooperative shared parenting arrangements can be more flexible, allowing parents to appropriately respond to changing circumstances and needs of their children. This flexibility can lead to more responsive parenting and better outcomes for children.
- **Support Networks:** Cooperative parenting can foster ongoing positive relationships and support among parents, extended family, and friends. This network can provide additional resources and emotional support for parents and children. When both parents work together harmoniously, they create an environment where others feel welcome to participate in the child's life. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and trusted family friends can offer additional emotional and practical support. Collaboration involves open dialogue and joint decision-making, which can lead to a broader network of people being involved in the child's upbringing. As both parents engage with their extended support systems, they model cooperation and community-building for their children, which can also help the children develop their own support networks. Children have access to a wider array of resources, guidance, and emotional support, leading to a more stable and enriched upbringing.
- **Improved Child Development:** Children whose parents can collaboratively share parenting often experience better emotional, social, and academic outcomes. They tend to have higher self-esteem, better behavioral adjustment, and stronger relationships with both parents. Children benefiting from consistent and meaningful relationships with both parents, experience fewer feelings of loss or abandonment. Parents working collaboratively shield them from stress and anxiety and provide models for problem-solving, cooperation, and conflict resolution.
- **Long-Term Relationships:** Cooperative shared parenting can help parents maintain a positive, long-term relationship focused on their children's well-being. This ongoing collaboration can lead to better co-parenting dynamics as children grow and their needs change.

Harmonious co-parenting creates an environment that promotes emotional stability and psychological well-being (including resilience and good self-esteem), and solid interpersonal skills, contributing to the likelihood that they are able to develop strong, secure attachments, which are crucial for their emotional and social development and long term relationships.

- **Reduced Parental Stress:** Sharing parenting responsibilities can also lead to lower stress levels for both parents since they are not solely responsible for all aspects of child-rearing. Collaboratively sharing parenting can contribute to both parents' mental health and overall well-being by allowing each parent time for self-care, rest, and personal pursuits which significantly lower stress. It also minimizes conflict, which is a major source of stress in divorce and co-parenting.

Cooperative shared parenting can create a supportive and nurturing environment for children while promoting healthier relationships between

parents. This approach ultimately benefits the entire family unit by prioritizing the children's needs and fostering positive interactions among all parties involved.

**"Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson"
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

While collaborative shared parenting lays the foundation for a cooperative and supportive environment, conflicts can still arise as parents navigate the complexities of raising children together. Effectively managing these disagreements is crucial for maintaining a healthy co-parenting relationship. "Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson" is a practical guide that offers a step-by-step approach to conflict resolution, equipping you with the tools to handle disagreements constructively. By mastering these tactics, you can resolve conflicts effectively, keeping the focus on what's most important—your child's well-being.



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