



# Putting Children First

## *During Family Conflicts*

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Our goal is to protect the rights of children during family conflicts. Child Centered Solutions educates parents and professionals about the effects of family conflicts on children using current research literature. Child Centered Solutions focuses on issues of divorce and children because such family conflict is so prevalent. Our mission is to provide a voice for children.

**Child Centered Solutions (CCS) is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.**

### **Acknowledgements:**

Many people contributed to the ideas shared in this pamphlet. We would especially like to thank the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts and Multnomah County Family Court Services. We would also like to thank Insight Media Ink for their help in printing this publication.

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# Table of Contents

Stewardship vs. Ownership Parenting	3
How Do You Prepare Children for Divorce?	4
How Do You Help Children Cope with Family Change?	5
What Are Some Positive Parenting Strategies?	6
What Questions Should Parents Ask Before Developing a Parenting Plan?	7
What Is a Workable Parenting Plan?	8
What Are Some Strategies for Handling Conflict?	10
What Should You Communicate to Your Children’s School?	11
What is a Custody or Parenting Evaluation?	12
Where Can Additional Resources Be Found?	13

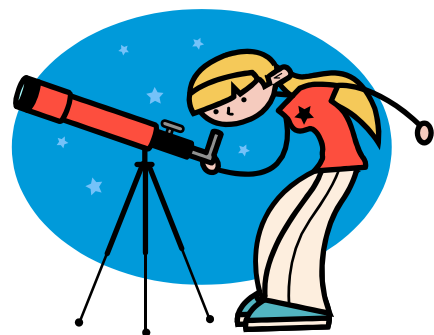
# Stewardship vs. Ownership Parenting

- Do we think of our children as objects we own like the car?
- Or do we act as stewards of our children by providing them with love, care and discipline?
- If we practice stewardship parenting, we recognize our children as unique individuals.

Stewardship	Ownership
The child is a person with his or her own feelings and experiences, separate from either parent and perhaps differing from each parent.	The child has no separate wants or needs, but is seen as an extension of the parent and the parent's needs. The parent may use words like "she left us" referring to the other parent moving out, when he or she only left the other spouse, not the child.
The child's need for each parent is accommodated.	One parent has difficulty seeing the child's need for the other parent.
Access to each parent is independent of how the parents feel about each other.	Access to parents is sometimes interrupted when the parents are angry at each other.
Parenting time is a responsibility and a privilege, and an opportunity to promote the child's development, including social activities.	Parenting time is seen as a right. Parenting time and the parent's needs take priority over the child's activities such as sports.

## How Do You Prepare Children for Divorce?

- Talk with your children about the divorce. If possible, you and the other parent together should have this discussion with the children.
- Be honest and sensitive with your children when you tell them about the separation.
- Explain that it is a joint decision by both parents not to live together.
- Tell the children they are loved by both parents even if the parents cannot be together.
- Assure the children they will be well taken care of and supported by both parents.
- Assure the children it is not their fault the parents are separating.
- Tell the children they can ask questions and ask for help.
- Avoid blaming the other parent in front of the children.
- Tell the children they have a right to maintain a healthy relationship with each parent.
- Allow children time to adjust to the family change.



# How Do You Help Children Cope with Family Change?

- Children need each parent to be part of their lives.
- Children, like their parents, feel the loss associated with divorce and separation.
- Parents should maintain continuity in their children's lives. It is helpful if children can attend the same school and participate in the same activities as they did prior to the separation.
- Children should not be drawn into the conflict between the parents.
- Each parent should avoid making disparaging comments about the other parent to the children, or to anyone in their children's network.
- Children suffer when they do not have a relationship with both parents.
- Children should never have to choose sides between their parents.
- Parents should know warning signs of stress in children:
  - Physical symptoms like stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, nail biting, loss of appetite or insomnia
  - Symptoms that have lasted a few weeks as opposed to a few days
  - Intense symptoms that interfere with the children's normal life
  - Behavior that is developmentally inappropriate—i.e., it may be normal for a two-year-old to cry when separating from a parent, but not for an older child.

# What Are Positive Parenting Strategies?

Co-parenting after separation presents many challenges. **Children benefit when parents:**

- Assure the children they did not cause the divorce and that they do not have the power to reverse the process.
- Communicate with each other in a courteous manner.
- Are on time and have them ready at exchange time.
- Give them time to adjust at the beginning and end of visits.
- Encourage them to carry important items such as clothing, toys, pictures and blankets between the parents' homes.
- Follow reasonably similar routines for mealtime, bedtime, and homework.
- Communicate about rules and discipline in order to handle them in a similar way.
- Support contact with grandparents and other extended family so the children do not experience a sense of loss.
- Go slowly when introducing new partners to them.
- Are flexible in the parenting schedule to accommodate their children's extracurricular activities and special family celebrations.
- Create positive and meaningful time to spend alone with each child.
- Discuss any proposed schedule changes directly with the other parent, rather than with your child.
- Support their relationship with the other parent.

# What Questions Should Parents Ask Before Developing a Parenting Plan?

- What parenting responsibilities have you assumed prior to the separation?
- How have you been involved in each child's recreational activities?
- What are the most important issues for each of your children and what do you believe are their individual needs?
- What are each of your strengths?
- How do you want to share responsibilities for the children?
- How do your children get along with each other?
- Have you considered the children's preferences?
- What will you do to put the children's needs ahead of your own?
- How can you protect your children from your own conflicts?
- Have you discussed with each other how and when to tell your children details of the parenting plan?



# What Is a Workable Parenting Plan?

- A parenting plan is a written schedule of the arrangements that parents agree to follow in rearing their children.
- A general plan provides an outline of parental time and access that is in the children's best interests.
- A more detailed plan can include guidelines for the residential schedule, holiday, birthday and vacation plans, decision-making and responsibility, information sharing and access, relocation of parents, and methods for resolving disputes.

## **Issues to Be Considered When Developing a Parenting Plan:**

- Focus on areas of agreement. Start with fundamental principles that you both agree on, and build on them.
- Build on the strengths of each parent.
- Maintain routines that have been successful. Stability and consistency are important for children.
- Remember that children's interests and activities change over time.
- Consider the ages of the children in determining parenting time schedules.
- Think about the personalities of the children. Some children have more difficulty adjusting to change, so fewer transitions may be better.
- Consider any special needs of the child—medical, developmental, educational and social.
- Evaluate your relationship with the other parent. If you can effectively communicate and co-parent, your children can go back and forth between your homes with less stress.

- Assess any safety issues when developing an appropriate parenting plan. Your children must be protected. The court can issue rules to ensure children's safety if they have been exposed to severe parental substance abuse, mental or emotional illness, neglect or abuse, domestic violence or criminal activity.
- Create rules about your behavior around your children. **Avoid making derogatory comments about each other. Do not use your children as messengers.**
- Agree about times and places to pick up and drop off your children.
- Include a statement in the parenting plan that explains the requirements if either one of you decides to move.
- See examples of parenting plans at the Oregon Judicial Department Family Law website:  
[www.ojd.state.or.us/osca/cpsd/courtimprovement/familylaw/index.htm](http://www.ojd.state.or.us/osca/cpsd/courtimprovement/familylaw/index.htm)



# What Are Strategies for Handling Conflict?

Conflict is an inevitable part of life. How we choose to respond to it can make a huge difference.

- Take care of yourself to better manage your stress level.
- Eat healthy foods, drink lots of water and get sufficient sleep.
- Engage in some form of physical activity. Exercise is important.
- Develop a support system with friends and family.
- Focus on positive thoughts about yourself and others, which can lead to positive actions.
- Abstain from using alcohol or other drugs to cope with stress.
- Avoid blaming, attacking, threatening or intimidating others.
- Express your feelings and concerns. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Consider contacting a professional counselor who can assist in helping you and your family.



# What Should You Communicate to Your Children's School about the Divorce?

- Not all children want their teachers to know about personal problems. Parents should consider their children's individual circumstances and decide whether it would be helpful for the teacher and/or counselor to be informed of changes in the family.
- When teachers know about a challenge or change at home, it is easier to understand and respond to changes in academic or social progress at school.
- Opening lines of communication between you and the school can help your children function better academically.
- Share key information about your children and their living situation, but not judgments or opinions about the other parent.
- The school staff has a responsibility to serve your child. They should not take sides in family disputes.
- Both parents should provide emergency numbers and contact information to the school. This allows the school to send reports of the children's school progress to each of you. Schools are required by law to provide information to and communicate with both parents.



## What Is a Custody or Parenting Evaluation?

- Parenting and custody evaluations help the parents, the attorneys and the judge understand the issues and needs of children. If parents can't agree on a parenting plan, the information in an evaluation can help **keep the focus on the needs of the children.**
- The evaluator is a mental health professional, psychologist or social worker who has expertise in child development, the divorce process and needs of children.
- A parenting or custody evaluation helps your family make a positive adjustment to divorce. While the evaluator may talk about past events, there is no attempt to find fault or blame for the divorce. The evaluator maintains a neutral and factual approach.
- Generally, the evaluation consists of interviewing the parents and their children and gathering information from others who have known your family. Psychological assessments may be performed as part of the evaluation.
- **The evaluator will not ask children to choose between parents.**
- When the evaluation is complete, the evaluator will provide the results before the court date. You will have an opportunity to discuss the evaluation with your attorney. Sometimes the evaluation helps settle the parenting issues. If not, the evaluator may make recommendations to the court.

## How You Can Help

- Provide any information requested by the evaluator.
- Try to focus on the future.
- Be honest with the evaluator.
- Tell your children in positive terms that the evaluator will be helping your family make a plan.
- Do not coach your children.

# Web Resources

**Child Centered Solutions - [www.childcenteredsolutions.org](http://www.childcenteredsolutions.org)**

**Kids in the Crossfire - [www.kidsinthecrossfire.org](http://www.kidsinthecrossfire.org)**

This short online video emphasizes the impact of parents' behavior during divorce and includes suggestions for improving communication and minimizing stress on children.

**ShareKids – [www.ShareKids.com](http://www.ShareKids.com)**

Web-based co-parenting resource that allows divorced parents to communicate about their children in a safe, non-confrontational manner. Includes an online calendar and diary that each parent can access.

**10 Tips for Divorcing Parents - [www.aaml.org](http://www.aaml.org)**

From the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, a list of ten suggestions for parents to keep the needs of their children in mind during the divorce process.

**Understanding and Dealing with Children During Divorce  
[www.oregoncounseling.org/handouts/divorceChildren.htm](http://www.oregoncounseling.org/handouts/divorceChildren.htm)**

From the Oregon Counseling Center, a short handout about the impact of divorce on children.

**Our Family Wizard – [www.ourfamilywizard.com](http://www.ourfamilywizard.com)**

An interactive online resource designed to help families with scheduling from separate households and managing important family information.

**Up to Parents – [www.uptoparents.com](http://www.uptoparents.com)**

A free, interactive web site that offers online exercises and support to help parents stay focused on their children during divorce.

**Stepping Back from Anger - [www.aaml.org](http://www.aaml.org)**

This online booklet from the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers about the impact of divorce on children also has a companion video available for purchase.

## Books for Parents

*The Co-Parenting Survival Guide: Letting Go of Conflict After a Difficult Divorce*, by Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman.

*The Divorced Dad's Survival Book: How to Stay Connected with Your Kids*, by David Knox and Kermit Leggett.

*Helping Your Kids Survive Your Divorce*, by Thomas Whiteman.

*Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising a Child with an Uncooperative Ex, A Hands-On, Practical Guide to Coping with Custody Issues that Arise with an Uncooperative Ex-Spouse*, by Julie A. Ross and Judy Corcoran.

*Mom's House, Dad's House: A Complete Guide for Parents Who Are Separated, Divorced, or Remarried*, by Isolina Ricci.

*Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Child's Needs*, by Philip Stahl.

*Positive Discipline for Single Parents: Nurturing, Cooperation, Respect and Joy in Your Single-Parent Family*, by Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin and Carol Delzer.

*Surviving The Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*, by Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan B. Kelly.

*What About the Kids: Raising Your Kids Before, During and After Divorce*, by Judith Wallerstein.

*Why Did You Have to Get a Divorce? And When Can I Get a Hamster?* by Anthony Wolfe.

## Books for Kids

*Dinosaurs Divorce*, by Marc Brown and Laurie Krasny Brown. (For young children)

*It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear: A Read-Together Book for Parents & Young Children During Divorce*, by Vicki Lansky and Jane Prince. (For young children)

*Was It the Chocolate Pudding? A Story For Little Kids About Divorce*, by Sandra Levins. (For young children)

*Mom's House, Dad's House for Kids: Feeling at Home in One Home or Two*, by Isolina Ricci. (For readers age 8-12)

*My Parents Are Getting Divorced: How to Keep It Together When Your Mom and Dad Are Splitting Up*, by Florence Cadier, Melissa Daly and Claire Gandini. (For readers age 8-12)

*Keeping Your Life Together When Your Parents Pull Apart: A Teen's Guide to Surviving Divorce*, by Angela E. Hunt. (Teens)

*Now What Do I Do: A Guide to Help Teenagers with Their Parents' Separation or Divorce*, by Lynn Cassella-Kapusinski. (Teens)





Child Centered Solutions (CCS) was founded by family law attorneys and mental health professionals to address the needs of children involved in family conflicts. Your tax-deductible gift provides a direct impact on the lives of Oregon's children.

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