



## **AGE-APPROPRIATE PARENTING PLANS**

**Featuring Philip Stahl, PhD, ABPP (Forensic)**

Friday, November 13, 2009

Billy Frank Jr. Conference Center  
Ecotrust  
Portland, Oregon

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**Age-Appropriate Parenting Plans**  
Child Centered Solutions  
Portland, Oregon  
November 13, 2009

Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D., ABPP (Forensic)

**Agenda**

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 8:30 – 9:00   | Registration   |
| 9:00 – 9:45   | Discussion of research in divorce and child custody,<br>including research on joint custody  |
| 9:45 – 10:25  | Developmental perspective of children's needs<br>regarding divorce and parenting issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Infants and toddlers</li></ul>   |
| 10:25 – 10:35 | BREAK (10 minutes)   |
| 10:35 – 11:30 | Developmental perspective of children's needs<br>regarding divorce and parenting issues (continued) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preschool-aged children</li><li>• School-aged children</li><li>• Adolescents</li></ul> |
| 11:30 – 11:45 | Discussion of parenting plan guidelines  |
| 11:45 – 12:00 | Questions / Answers / Discussion   |

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## Age-Appropriate Parenting Plans

Child Centered Solutions  
Portland, OR  
November 13, 2009  
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## Objectives

- After attending this workshop, participants will better understand:
  - Divorce and Child Development Research
  - Research related to Joint Custody
  - Developmental Issues for:
    - Infants & Toddlers
    - Pre-School Children
    - School-Aged Children
    - Adolescents
  - Guidelines in Parenting Plans?

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## What Does the Research Say? (Emery, 1999)

- Research is quite variable
- Depends on where and how it was done
- Sample issues
- What do the findings mean?
- Are findings over-stated or misinterpreted?

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### What Does the Research Say?

- Wallerstein and others have studied children of divorce for years. Findings include:
  - Greater % of divorced children have significant risk of undesirable outcomes in the areas of school performance; delinquency; emotional turmoil, insecurity, and depression; more teen childbirth, and an increased likelihood of getting divorced themselves

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### Mavis Hetherington

- Response to Wallerstein
  - Many of the observations are important "but she often treats divorce like the kids have had a terminal disease they are never going to recover from"
  - Research consistently shows that 20 -25 % of children show serious problems with intimacy and relationships compared with 10% of children in non-divorced families.
  - Therefore, at least 75% of children whose parents are divorced are doing fine

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### What Does the Research Say?

- However, there is not a one-to-one relationship between divorce and problems in any of these domains.
- Resilience, not risk, is the normative outcome
- Most children do NOT have behavioral, educational, or mental health problems following their parents' divorce

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- Socioeconomic factors explain some of the risk associated with divorce
- Gender and ethnicity have minimal effect
- Most important, many of the problems found among children of divorce actually began prior to the marital separation
- Conflict in marriage is just as risky as conflict in divorce

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- Children have more psychological problems when parents are in conflict either during marriage or following divorce
- Children fare best in a happy, two-parent family
- Children may be better off living in happy divorced family than conflict-ridden married family

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- Factors that contribute to high levels of conflict
  - continuation of hostility that began during the marriage
  - differing perceptions of child-rearing roles
  - concern about adequacy of other parent's child-rearing abilities

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- Personality factors that contribute to high levels of conflict
  - narcissism
  - interpersonal vulnerability
  - lack of empathy for children and other parent
  - lack of acceptance of the end of the relationship

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- Types of Post-Divorce Relationships (Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992)
  - cooperative parenting
  - conflicted coparenting
  - disengaged
  - mixed (both cooperative and conflicted)
  - Typically, conflict declines over time and is replaced by disengagement

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- Types of Post-Divorce Relationships (Ahrns, 2001)
  - Parenting Pals
  - Cooperative Colleagues
  - Angry Associates
  - Fiery Foes

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### Research-Based Parenting Plan Options

- Access is not based on theory, bias, untested assumptions, or personal belief
- Children's ages considered
- Quality of parent-child relationships considered
- Options can be customized to family situation
- Range of options assist in settlement
- Helpful for professionals and parents without much knowledge of divorce and child development research

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### Using Research To Develop Model Parenting Plans

- Survey related research on divorce, child development, & parent-child relationships
- Provide framework of options for each developmental age group
- Give parents reliable information re: risk and protective factors in child adjustment after divorce

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### Interactions Of Mothers And Fathers With Infants

- Some gender differences
- Play is large component of father-infant relationships
- Physical care giving is large component of mother-infant
- Marital quality important
- Mothers' attitudes important

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### Children's Views On Contacts With Fathers

- Loss of parent is most negative aspect of divorce for children
- Feelings of deprivation and dissatisfaction with infrequent contact
- 12 days between contacts too long
- Fathers become peripheral to children's lives

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### Children's Views On Contacts With Fathers (2)

- More than half of children want more contact with fathers
  - Boys want more contact than girls
  - Younger children want more contact than older
- Satisfaction with father contacts generally high in studies
  - 85% liked it (nz)
  - 13% neutral about contact
  - 34% wanted contacts to be longer

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### Children's Views On Contacts With Fathers (3)

- Children want nonresident fathers to be:
  - Emotionally supportive
  - Affectionate
  - Actively engaged in their lives
- Children seek to avoid fathers who are:
  - Hostile
  - Coercive
  - Detached
- Conflict at transitions is painful

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### Children's Views Of Custody Arrangements

- More satisfaction with shared physical custody plans
- Greater closeness in joint vs. sole physical custody
- Less focus on divorce effects in joint custody youngsters

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### What Arrangements Do Most Children and Adolescents Want?

- More than every other weekend
- Equal time is first choice
- Substantial number of overnights
- Opportunity for input on plans
- Flexibility to make changes in schedule

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### Post-divorce Factors and Children's Adjustment

- Adjustment of residential parent
- Competent parenting
- Access and relationship with nonresidential parent
- Sole physical vs. Joint physical
- Conflict between parents
- Coparenting arrangements
- Number of family transitions

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## Adjustment of Residential Parent

- Strong link to children's adjustment
- Problems with residential parent with:
  - Depression and anxiety
  - Mental illness
  - Character disorders
- Nonresidential parent with limited time and relationship is not sufficient buffer

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## Parenting Is Critical

- Effective parenting can moderate impact of divorce and multiple family transitions
- Research definitions of effective parenting

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## Effective Parenting - Mothers

- Warmth
- Authoritative discipline
- Appropriate expectations
- Academic skill encouragement
- Monitoring of activities

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### Effective Parenting - Fathers

- Involvement in school
- Active involvement in projects
- Emotional support
- Authoritative discipline
- Monitoring of activities

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### Parent Conflict After Divorce

- 8 – 12% remain in high conflict 2 – 3 years post-divorce
- Psychiatric illness and personality disorders among this group
- More specific research needed
- Differentiating parent conflict re: parenting plans

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### Differentiating Dimensions Of Parental Conflict

- Intensity of Conflict
- Focus of Conflict
- Conflict Expressed through Child
- Protective Buffers for Children
- Style of Resolution of Conflict
- Interpersonal vs. Legal Conflict

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## Parent Behaviors that Make Child Feel Caught in the Middle

- Asking Child to Carry Hostile Messages
- Asking Intrusive Questions about Other Parent
- Creating a Need for Child to Hide Information
- Creating a Need to Conceal Feelings about Other Parent

Buchanan, C., Maccoby, E. & Dornbusch, S. (1991). Caught between parents: Adolescents' experience in divorced homes. *Child Development*, 62, 1008-1029. 28

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## Parallel Parenting

- Cooperative parenting is not achievable by the majority
- Parallel parenting is acceptable
- Courts and mediators need to explain possible parenting models and mediate details of necessary communication

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## Bauserman, 2002

- Compared with children in sole-custody situations, children in joint-custody arrangements had:
  - Fewer behavioral and emotional problems
  - Higher self-esteem
  - Better family relationships
  - Better school performance

"Child Adjustment in Joint-Custody vs. Sole-Custody Arrangements: A Meta-Analytic Review". *Journal of Family Psychology*, March 2002, 16, 1

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### Bauserman, 2002, cont.

- No significant difference in adjustment among children in shared custody and those living in intact families
- Main reason – Ongoing contact with both parents
- Need not be joint physical custody as long as they spend substantial time with both parents
- Sole-custody parents report higher degrees of conflict over time

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### Bauserman, 2002, cont.

- Joint custody not always preferable, especially when one parent is:
  - Abusive
  - Neglectful
  - Has serious mental health problems, or
  - Trouble adjusting after divorce

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### INFANTS AND TODDLERS: WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO DEVELOPMENT?

- Attachment formation
  - Building strong emotional ties to important caregivers
  - Reciprocal, interactive process
  - Critical achievement in first year

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### Primary vs. Multiple Attachments?

- Early research focused only on mothers and infants
- Multiple attachments are the norm
- Infants attach to **BOTH** parents at same age: 6 – 7 months

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### WHAT CREATES ATTACHMENTS?

- Cumulative experience of responsive care
- Attention to child's needs and social overtures

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### FACTORS INFLUENCING SECURITY OF ATTACHMENTS

- Poverty
- Violence
- Intense marital conflict
- Poor parenting styles
- Abuse and neglect
- Major life changes (separation, divorce, remarriage)

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### Phases Of Attachment Process

- Indiscriminate social responsiveness
- Discriminating sociability
- Attachments
- Goal-corrected partnerships

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### Implications For Access Arrangements For Infants And Toddlers

- Maintain attachments to both parents (if adequate parents)
- Minimize separation time from both parents
- Loss of attachment figure may cause psychological harm

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### Maintaining Infant-Parent Attachments After Separation

- Frequent contacts - every second or third day meets infant's needs for continuity
- Extended visits and overnights
- Contacts should allow normal parenting opportunities

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## Kelly and Lamb

- Children benefit from several things:
  - Effective Parenting
    - Sensitivity
    - Warmth
    - Involvement
    - Consistent Rational Discipline
    - Nurturing
    - Responsiveness
    - Authoritative Style

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## Kelly and Lamb

- Applications of attachment theory to child development:
  - Relationships with both parents are meaningful and help shape the child's emotional and overall development
  - One relationship may be more important than the other, but both are meaningful

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## Kelly and Lamb

- Effects of Divorce on Children:
  - Potential risk areas are:
    - Psychosocial adjustment
    - Academic performance
    - Antisocial behavior
    - Intimate relationships
  - The majority of children don't experience these effects

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**Kelly and Lamb**

- Factors associated with Better and Worse adjustment:
  - Conflict
  - Economics
  - Healthy Parenting
- Negative effects are modulated by the healthy quality and positive involvement of both parents

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**Kelly and Lamb**

- Implications for parenting plans:
  - For young children, short separations from both parents
  - Regular interactions in diverse contexts
  - Overnights (Critical for emotional involvement)
  - Equal time is not necessary - approximately 35 % or so is fine if distributed well

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**Kelly and Lamb**

- Continuity with both parents is extremely important and needs to be preserved
- Continuity is for psychological relationships
- Continuity does less for physical development
- Continuity is most important for psychosocial development and development of other social relationships
- Routines are very important for young children

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## Kelly and Lamb's Conclusion

- Children benefit from meaningful relationships with two parents unless one is unwilling, incapable, mentally ill, abusive, or engenders too much conflict.
- To be responsive to the infant's psychological needs, parenting schedules adopted for children under age two or three must involve more transitions, rather than fewer, to ensure the continuity of both relationships and the child's security and comfort during a time of great change ... To minimize the deleterious impact of extended separations from either parent, there should be more frequent transitions than would perhaps be desirable with older children.

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## RESEARCH ON OVERNIGHTS

- Solomon & George  
Serious Methodological Weaknesses  
Recommend No Overnights Until Age 4  
Not Supported by Own Findings
- Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella (FCR, 2004)  
Overnights Not Harmful  
Consistency of Schedule Important  
No Difference between Age Groups

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## Stability For Young Children After Divorce

- Sources of stability:
  - Relationships with parents, siblings, extended family
  - Consistent schedule & caregivers
- One household stability overrated
- Economic resources and opportunities
- Detailed, well-defined parenting plans

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### WHAT TO DO WHEN CONFLICT IS HIGH

- Transitions at day care
- Use of babysitters or extended family
- Parent counselor or mediator
- Highly structured parenting plan
- Use of daily journals

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### Risks for Infants?

- Development of Insecure Attachments with one or both parents
- Depression – Failure to Thrive
- Lack of Trust
- View that the world is a scary place

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”<sup>1</sup>

- An example of how to approach a parenting plan, using an article on overnights with young children

Gould & Stahl, Family Court Review, Fall, 2001

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### "Never Paint by the Numbers"

- Whether one believes that very young children are able to have overnight parenting time with each parent or need to have a stable, single night placement, there is no substitute for researching the particular parenting history of the family being evaluated

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### "Never Paint by the Numbers"

- If the child has had a history of joint care taking and has shown little, if any, difficulty being parented and cared for by each parent while the family was intact, then one might look closely at continuing the parenting arrangement which existed prior to the separation.
- If both parents were actively involved in the infant and toddler's daily care and night time rituals, it might be developmentally appropriate to continue to foster the relationship between the young child and each parent by including overnight parenting time with each parent.
- If there has been one primary parent, and that parent has done the majority of care giving, it might be more appropriate to continue the primary relationship while gradually encouraging the other parent to increase his/her involvement with and parenting of the child.

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### "Never Paint by the Numbers"

- A second dimension to examine is the attachment history between the infant and each parent.
  - Explore the skills which each parent brings to the task of parenting the infant and toddler.
  - Assess parenting skills across different care taking domains to understand what access and living arrangements are best.
  - This might include assessing both daytime parenting and care taking behaviors as distinct and separate from night time parenting and care taking rituals.

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”

- Evaluators should recognize that parents have different strengths and weaknesses.
- When living together, many parents tend to complement each other in various ways.
- Analysis of skills may determine that mother is competent in one area in which the father is less skilled while father is more competent in some areas in which mother is less skilled.
- When living apart, there is no complementary relationship for the child.
- each parent is asked to fulfill the responsibilities of both parents during the time that their child is in each of their care.

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”

- A competent evaluator needs to critically examine the complementary fit that existed during the marriage in order to understand the advantages and disadvantages each parent brings to the infant or toddler when parenting the child alone.
- Understanding the previous complementary parenting relationship might help shed light on the nature and quality of parenting the infant or toddler will be exposed to during the separation.
- When there are significant differences in competence, the evaluator works to craft parenting recommendations that allow each parent to have care of his/her young child in a way to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of each parent and parent / child interactions.

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”

- A fourth dimension is the temperament of the child.
  - Some children, regardless of the parents' relative strengths and weaknesses, may have a temperament which requires more stability and consistency, and a routine that is primarily with one parent.
  - Other children, who are more flexible and easy-going, will be able to move more easily between households, as long as both parents are relatively equal in their daytime and nighttime parenting abilities.

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”

- A fifth dimension to be considered is the communication between the parents.
  - Even if parents can't discuss their child very well because of a high level of conflict, they can still use a "parent book" or some other mechanism to discuss important issues about their child.
  - Parents who share information about a wide array of developmental issues are usually more successful in sharing their child than parents who cannot.
  - When there are problems in communication, evaluators can recommend ways to enhance the communication about the child, regardless of overnight access.

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”

- A final dimension is the care being given to the child by someone other than the parents when both parents are unavailable.
  - If parents use a nanny to go back and forth between each parent's home with the child, and if parenting competencies are relatively equal, it's more likely that the child can successfully spend relatively equal time with both parents.
  - Since children potentially develop multiple attachments with multiple caregivers an analysis along this dimension will help the evaluator when considering access and residential arrangements.

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### “Never Paint by the Numbers”

- In conclusion:
  - Regardless of whether you agree that infants and toddlers are able to accommodate overnight parenting arrangements with each parent or need a single, stable overnight placement, the art of child custody evaluations is applying the results from aggregate research results to the specific, ideographic (and idiosyncratic) needs of a particular family.

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### **“Never Paint by the Numbers”**

- Research results are important in their ability to guide our thinking about how specific results might be relevant to a particular family system.
- There is never any substitute for exploring the history and dynamics of a particular family and then integrating that data with current research.
- Evaluators will include collateral contacts along with interviews and direct observations in evaluating the above dimensions.

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### **“Never Paint by the Numbers”**

- Then, evaluators can discuss, often directly in the evaluation report, or in direct testimony, how the research may or may not apply to the particular family system under examination.
- The evaluator should also be clear, both in the report and in testimony, to distinguish among clinical judgments, research-based opinions, and philosophical positions.
- Evaluators never paint by the numbers. They always need to consider the best application for each family, integrating all the research into our understanding of the particular family and the particular child's needs.

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### **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO DEVELOPMENT?**

- Attachment relationships deepened
- Physical and emotional care
- Development of self-control / self concept / competence
- Expansion of social world
- Learning to cooperate
- Play as learning experience

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### Pre-School Children (3 - 6 Years)

- Continued focus on predictability, routine and structure for the child
- Children aged three and older can certainly tolerate overnight contact with each parent
- Discipline and routine needs to be consistent in each parent's home
- Parents need to share information about the child and his/her eating, sleeping, toileting, medical, and social / emotional functioning
- Children need freedom from direct conflict; if the parents continue to be in conflict, parents might consider using neutral sites (e.g; school or day-care) for transitions

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### Pre-School Children (Cont.)

- Children in this age group often benefit from blocks of time with each parent that enables them to be settled in routines at each home. However, many of these children don't do well with frequent transitions
- Parents need to put their needs secondary to the child's. While the non-custodial parent can enjoy longer blocks of time than younger children, many children of this age still need a primary home. This is dependent on whether parents are consistent and relatively free of conflict, and will be affected by the degree of vulnerability and stress in the child
- There may be situations in which each parent has some serious pathology or parenting flaws, but each offers the child something the other doesn't. In those cases, a parenting plan that maximizes each parent's strengths while minimizing the extent to which the child is exposed to the pathology is ideal

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### Risks for Preschoolers?

- Development of Insecure Attachments with one or both parents
- Poor socialization
- Development of fears
- Limitations in Language skills / Regression
- Feelings of inadequacy

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**AGES 6-11:  
WHAT IS CENTRAL IN DEVELOPMENT**

- Increasing autonomy
- Expanded socialization / Effective social skills
- Intellectual stimulation / Academic achievement
- Moral development
- Consolidating sense of competence
- Both parents unique contributions

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**School-Age Children (6 - 12 Years)**

- These children need a structured and consistent time-share that assures access to each parent, when indicated
- Optimal parenting plans range from 35 - 65 % of time with either parent (and thus a primary home) to 50/50 joint physical custody in which the child is with each parent about ½ of the time
- Children of this age often express a wish for equal time with their parents, this may simply be to keep things fair

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**School-Aged Children (Cont.)**

- Joint custody requires:
  - a degree of consistency and a willingness for the parents to resolve their conflicts away from the child
  - parents to share all of the tasks of parenting
  - parents who help the child and each other transfer child's things (school supplies, athletic equipment, etc.) from one house to the other

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### School-Aged Children (Cont.)

- The time-share needs to promote each parent's strengths, while giving each parent time alone to recover from the divorce on their own
- Exchanges should minimize the extent to which the child is exposed to the conflict. School or other neutral places are excellent transition places

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### School-Aged Children (Cont.)

- Conflict resolution must keep children out of the middle
  - Children should not be messengers or spies
  - Communication needs to be by and through parents
  - May need the aid of a neutral professional
- If parents can do it, there should be a plan for coparenting
- When the conflict is more extreme, parallel parenting is indicated

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### Risks for School-Age Children?

- Becoming Aligned or Alienated
- Becoming Parentified
- Social Problems
- School Problems
- Poor Self-Esteem

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**ADOLESCENTS:  
WHAT IS CENTRAL TO DEVELOPMENT**

- Increasing autonomy and responsibility
  
- Social experiences, dating
  
- Parents serve as monitors / mentors
  - Limit-setting, curfews, rules
  - Parental communication
  - Parental support for achievement and future goals

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**Adolescents (13-17 Years)**

- Time-share plan can incorporate a range of possibilities
  
- Many adolescents prefer one primary home, in large part to avoid confusion for their friends. For many of these teens, they will want weekends or evenings with the other parent

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**Adolescents (Cont.)**

- Some prefer a balanced, 50/50 plan with their parents. Much of this will depend on the prior history of the relationships with each parent and the availability of the parents to meet their needs
  
- Adolescents may use one parent's home to get a break from the other parent or siblings

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### Adolescents (Cont.)

- Adolescents definitely want a say in the parenting plan
- Siblings may require a different schedule, while still maintaining some interaction between them
- Adolescents may need support services such as therapy, substance abuse counseling, tutoring, or other such needs

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### Adolescents (Cont.)

- Parents need to manage their conflicts away from the teen and maintain healthy boundaries with them
- Parents should not confide their adult issues to their teen
- In cases of severe high-conflict:
  - encourage teen's autonomy and detachments from both parents
  - other appropriate supportive adults are important
  - for high-risk teens, someone may need to monitor and assess ongoing risks

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### Risks for Adolescents?

- Regression and withdrawal
- Serious teen problems, e.g., delinquency, promiscuity, substance abuse, eating disorders, serious authority problems (rebellious)
- School drop out or failure
- Lack of autonomy and goals for future

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**In Developing Orders  
We Must Must Consider:**

- The child's age and developmental needs
- The emotional functioning of each parent
- The respective strengths and weaknesses of each parent
- The relative attachments of the child to each parent

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**In Developing Orders  
We Must Must Consider:**

- The degree and intensity of the parental conflict
  
- The child's emotional functioning, and
  
- The child's wishes

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**What About Guidelines for  
Custody and Visitation?**

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## What Are Guidelines?

- Prescriptions for children's time with nonresidential parent
- Can be formal or informal, written, or personal rules and judicial beliefs
- Often provide single option
- All parents assumed to be the same
- All parent-child relationships the same

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## Guideline Examples

- 0-1 yrs: "visitation- - frequent but not more than 1-3 hours at a time. Same home." (King county, WA)
- "Overnight visits should be considered less than desirable". (Hodges, 1991)
- 1- 3 ½ yrs: "by 3, an overnight or weekend." (King county, WA)
- 5-9 yrs: 2 weekends a month
- 12-14 yrs: alternate weekends, one additional afternoon/weekend per week (Mohave county)

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## Problems With Simple Guidelines

- One size fits all
- Many disregard developmental stages and needs
- Quality of parenting and parent-child relationships not considered
- No assessment of child's best interests
- Cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, & employment differences not considered
- Not research based

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### Issues In Developing Parenting Plans

- Continuity and meaningful parenting in both relationships, if appropriate
- Both parents engage in child's work and play
- Reduce conflict and presence of buffers
- Possible interventions with high conflict parents to contain conflict
- Consequences for high conflict and violence at transitions
- Giving mature children a voice in developing and changing parenting plan
- Flexibility

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### Parenting Plan Options - Limited Access (School Age)

- Every other weekend (48 hrs) 4/28  
 12 days separation too long for many children  
 NRP-child relationship diminishes in meaning  
 NRP less involved in school/homework/projects  
 RP has little time off  
 May benefit children if NRP angry/inept/rigid  
 14% timeshare
- E. O. Weekend & brief midweek visit  
 7 days separation too long for many children  
 Transition back to RP home has potential for conflict  
 Little time for homework or reconnecting  
 Often seen as rushed, hectic

\*Number of overnights each four weeks with nonresident parent

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### Parenting Plan Options - Limited Access (School Age)

- E. O extended weekend 6/28  
 (Friday pm - Monday am)  
 More expansive weekend  
 Child dropped off at school/daycare  
 Reduced opportunity for conflict  
 One less transition for child  
 Not workable if NRP lives too far away  
 21% timeshare

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### Parenting Plan Options – Mid/Range Contact

- **E. O. WEEKEND + MDWK OVERNIGHT** 8/28  
 (Friday – Sunday pm; Wednesday pm – Thursday am)  
 No Separation Greater than 6 Days  
 NRP Engages in School & Homework  
 CP has regular mid-week evening off-duty  
 No transition & conflict Wednesday evening  
 28% timeshare
- **E.O. EXTENDED WKEND + MDWK OVRNIGHT** 10/28  
 Same as above, with weekend to Monday am  
 NRP assumes more responsibility for homework  
 Potential for conflict eliminated with school/daycare pickups  
 36% timeshare

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### Parenting Plan Options - Shared Physical Custody

- **E.O. WEEKEND AND SPLIT MIDWKS** 14/28  
 (Fri to Mon am; Parent A: Mon. pm – Weds. am & Parent  
 B: Weds. pm – Fri. am, each week)  
 All transitions at school or day care avoid conflict  
 Consistent midweek residence each week  
 Five days separation acceptable for most children age 5 +  
 Each residence provides clothing, equipment  
 Both parents fully involved in school, activities, play  
 Most children satisfied with shared arrangements  
 May not work for children with disabilities, difficult temperament  
 This 2-2-5-5 pattern is 50% timeshare

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### Parenting Plan Options - Joint Custody - Preschool

- **All weekends and midweek split**  
 (Friday pm – Saturday pm or Sunday am; Saturday pm –  
 Sunday pm or Monday am; midweek divided as described  
 above)
- No separation from parents greater than 3 days
- More appropriate for preschool or two year old
- Often an interim schedule until child is 5 or 6
- Weekend transitions may be problem for high  
 conflict

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## Parenting Plan Options - Shared Physical Custody

- **Every other week** 14/28  
(Fri after school – next Fri am; Mon. to Mon.)
  - 7 day separation stresses younger children (< 6-7)
  - Minimum number of transitions per month
  - Parent and children can settle into routine
  - Lessons & activities may be a problem
  - Adolescents may want 2 week or monthly rotation
  - Eliminates face-to-face parent conflict

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## The Revised Arizona Model Parenting Plans, 2009

Website Link will be available at the presentation!

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## **Your Child's Childhood: Developmental Needs through the Years** <sup>1</sup>

**I**F YOU ARE LIKE MOST PARENTS, you're likely to wonder how your divorce will affect your child. Like many life experiences, the effect is dependent upon the age of the child. It's obvious that infants and toddlers need a different style of parenting than adolescents. Similarly, a two-year-old may react differently to the birth of a sibling than a seven-year-old will.

In the same way, divorce will affect a very young child quite differently than an older child. This chapter is designed to focus on children's developmental needs, that is, their needs at different ages. I have divided this chapter into four major age groups. Keep in mind there may be an overlap between children of close ages, even if they are in different groups. Also, many children regress -- revert to earlier or more infantile patterns -- when parents divorce because of the initial anxiety and insecurity they feel. It is common for children to regress for a short period of time. Paying attention to the information given for younger age groups — as well as that of your own child's — may help you better understand your child and his needs. If your child regresses for more than six months, you are likely to need the help of a therapist.

In this chapter, I'll explain the basic characteristics, behavior, and needs of children within each age group. We'll also explore how divorce affects children at different ages, and I'll suggest some ways you can help your child adjust to your divorce.

Many parents wonder about what residential arrangements are “best” for their children. If you have read books on divorce, you might notice some debate within the mental health community about this very issue. Research suggests that your mental health and how much conflict your child is exposed to are more important variables in determining how your child will adjust to your divorce than the visitation schedule. If the circumstances are right, even young children can adjust to two homes. Many school-age children need the consistency of one home, while others need the consistency of both parents. Regardless of your schedule, your child may have trouble if there is too much conflict.

Just a reminder: the schedule which works best is unique to your particular family and lifestyle. I urge you to develop your specific parenting plan -- with the help of a mediator if necessary -- according to your child's needs and your family's lifestyle and circumstances.

## ***Infants and Toddlers (0 - 3 years)***

During these first three years of life, the foundations of basic trust and relationships are formed. In the first year of life, children develop an initial primary attachment, one which is necessary for trust to develop. By the end of the first year, language skills are developing. Your infant's personality is forming. During the toddler years, your child begins developing her own sense of self, and starts to separate from her parents. She will begin to assert herself. Her emotions may be quite unpredictable. This age is often referred to as "the terrible two's," because many children in this age group have temper outbursts, frequently say "no," and may be demanding and stubborn. However, these behaviors are very important for your child's development. Your child's behaviors — and your responses — will set the stage for her future relationships. By age three, if all goes well, these emotions settle down, language skills are more advanced, and she is likely to be toilet trained.

Children in this age group require predictability, consistency, and routine. When a divorce occurs during this time, there is a loss which your child feels but cannot fully comprehend. This loss can be extreme if there is a major disruption in the consistency of the existing relationships. She may express frustration through her behavior and emotions. Typical symptoms include regression and developmental delays. The child may experience problems with feeding, sleeping, and self-soothing. Some children become irritable, depressed, and withdrawn, in part because they don't know how to express their loss in words. Separation anxiety for children in this age group may increase. If one or both parents become depressed — a common occurrence — basic care may diminish.

Rather than the idea of one "psychological parent," or "primary parent," recent research supports the belief that children can have more than one important attachment figure. The "primary parent" is defined as the parent the child is most attached to, and looks to when she is feeling insecure or needy. Some children have one primary parent who has attended to most of their day-to-day needs. Other children may have two or three adults — such as two parents and a grandparent or day-care provider — who are relatively equal at meeting their day-to-day needs. If your child is equally attached to both parents, I would say he has two primary parents. Your child's needs will be different if she has one, rather than two, primary parents. With very young children, I urge parents to try to arrange a post-divorce parenting plan that is closest to the pre-divorce parenting plan, at least for the first few months of the divorce.

Parenting plans for children of this age group need to integrate the following ideas:

- Your child's relationship with the primary parent is most important during the first three years of life.
- The critical task for infants in the first year of life is to develop a healthy attachment to a parent or both parents. This attachment serves as the foundation for future relationships.
- Children up to 18 months old must have stability and security in their relationships.
- Research on day-care shows that children can develop normally when separated from parents who are at work, suggesting that very young children can tolerate regular separations from one parent to be with the other parent. This will be affected by how much each parent has been directly involved in the child's life.
- If there is only one primary parent, frequent, shorter visits with the other parent may be ideal in the first year to eighteen months. Overnight visits may need to be limited in the first year of life if there is only one primary parent.
- The major role of parents and care-givers is to provide security, love, support, flexibility, and consistency.
- As your child's mental development allows him to hold memories of you when you are not with him, he may begin to tolerate and benefit from more overnight time with the other parent. Depending on your child's temperament and other factors discussed below, this may happen around 18 months.
- Sharing the parenting equally will require that your child has an easy temperament. Children with an easy temperament handle changes in routine with little difficulty. They are neither very shy, nor considered to be demanding or difficult. They are basically easy-going in their attitude. You and the other parent will need to support each other and exchange your child without conflict. You will need similar routines in each household, relative stability of the transitions, and an ability to communicate about your child's developmental, medical, and emotional needs. It will be important to arrange a plan that allows both of you to help with these needs.

You need to have the ability to help each other understand your young child, work together to develop routines that are familiar to your child, cooperate on soothing your child, help each other as your child starts talking, reassure each other in your parenting techniques, and be flexible as your child grows and changes. These techniques are used in healthy, intact families. If used in your separated family, a shared parenting plan will be natural for you and your child.

On the other hand, if you are in a great deal of conflict with the other parent, your very young child may benefit from a schedule that is similar to your pre-separation life. You may want

to continue the time and caregiving arrangements you had prior to separation. From your child's viewpoint, there is no need to have either of you considered the primary parent in the legal system; rather, your child needs to rely on the predictability of his environment until your conflict subsides.

### ***Preschoolers (3 - 5 years)***

During this stage, the child has a better ability to understand language, relationships, and feelings. Children of this age develop their thinking skills and friendships. If the separation process has been healthy, they can go to preschool and make friends. Children in this age group are delightful! They are learning to cope with their feelings, and are fascinated about everything. If they have had secure parenting, they will be ready to go on to kindergarten with plenty of self-esteem and confidence.

On the other hand, preschoolers are at risk for fairly serious regression when they are afraid of losing one of their parents. They can become easily confused and not understand what's going on around them. Developmental delays and regression in toileting, sleeping, and eating are common. They may experience irritability and display clinging behavior. Some children become depressed and withdrawn. Nightmares may become more frequent or pronounced. Self-confidence may suffer, and there can be an increase in aggressive and strange behaviors. Many of the children in this age group worry about their parents and may try to act "perfect" because they are afraid of the changes in their lives. They may also worry about their parents and try to take some responsibility for them, blaming themselves for adult problems. A certain amount of these behaviors are normal during the early stages of the divorce, but too many or for too long (more than a year) could reflect a more serious problem for your child.

Parenting plans for children of this age group need to cover these issues:

- Continued predictability, routine, and structure is important for the child.
- Children age three and older can generally tolerate overnight contact with each parent.
- Discipline and routine must be consistent in each parent's home.
- You will need to share information about your child's eating, sleeping, toileting, medical, social, and emotional functioning.
- Your child needs freedom from direct conflict. If you continue to be in conflict with the other parent, you will need to consider using neutral sites for transitions (such as preschool or day-care). If you speak on the phone with the other parent, do so after your child is asleep, so he does not overhear any potentially unpleasant conversations.

- Children in this age group often benefit from blocks of time with each parent that enable them to settle into a routine at each home. Try to avoid frequent transitions.
- Put your needs secondary to your child's. While one parent may want longer blocks of time as your child gets a bit older, many children in this age group still need a primary home. Factors to consider are whether there has been a primary parent, whether you and the other parent are consistent and relatively free of conflict, and whether your child is experiencing significant stress.
- There may be situations where each of you will have some serious parenting difficulties. On the other hand, each of you can offer your child something the other cannot. You will want a parenting plan that maximizes the strengths of each parent, while minimizing the weaknesses.

### ***School-Age Children (6 - 12 years)***

At this age, children thrive on structure and routine. Friendships grow, and they learn skill in their social relationships. Creativity continues to grow, and children in this group are good at making up games with unique rules. These rules are important as school-age children focus on fairness in their lives. Socialization and being part of a group are important to children of this age. They are learning to better understand and express their feelings and master academic skills. They can be quite silly at times, and still prefer to play much of the time. They learn skills in such areas as academics, sports, music, dance, and art. Self-esteem grows when they function well in school, on the playground, and in the family. Many children of this age have a different type of relationship with each parent, preferring Mom for some things and Dad for others.

Divorce brings many challenges to children of this age. Younger school-age children tend to feel the loss of the family as a unit and may experience sadness and crying. Older children in this age group may be more likely to experience anger and choose one parent over the other as a way to hold on to their self-esteem and relationships. Your child may feel directly responsible for your divorce, especially if she is put in the middle of your conflict. Some children will exhibit more severe symptoms, including tantrums, regression, sleep problems, behavioral and academic problems in school, withdrawal or aggression with peers, and depression. Some of these children are reluctant to grow up, and instead remain emotionally immature. Children in this age group believe in fairness and want to please their parents. They may feel overwhelmed by your conflicts and try to fix them, yet they can't. If one of the parents is depressed, your child may try to take care of that parent's emotional problems.



In extremely high-conflict families, children may have no obvious symptoms. They may feel overwhelmed and scared, but don't show anyone. These children are at risk for emotional splitting, where they perceive one parent is "all-good" and the other is "all-bad." Many children feel stuck by the loyalty conflicts and may keep their emotions inside, worrying about their parents. If your child was previously close with both of you, and now is only close to one of you, she may be feeling abandoned, confused, or alienated. Your child will have difficulty maintaining her self-image if you and the other parent are in very high conflict. Struggling with her emotions, your child may become emotionally overwhelmed and disorganized. I'll discuss the topic of alienated children in more detail in chapter 8.

It is common for children to hear one parent blame the other or hear different explanations for things they experience. For example, it can be quite confusing to children when one parent says, "I don't know why your mother doesn't call you when you're here. She probably doesn't care much about you," and the other parent says, "I called you three times last night. Why didn't you call back? Doesn't your dad give you the messages?" The child may not know which parent to believe. Parents need to understand how children feel when they belittle each other or when the children are placed in confusing situations.

Parenting plans for children of this age group need the following:

- A structured and consistent time share that guarantees access to each parent, when appropriate. The best parenting plans range from a split of thirty-five percent to sixty-five percent of time with either parent (and thus a primary home), to fifty-fifty joint physical custody, in which the child is with each parent about half of the time. If your child had a strong relationship with you prior to your divorce, she may feel rejected by you if she doesn't see you enough after the divorce. While children often express a wish for equal time with both of their parents, this may be to keep things fair, or because they truly want to spend equal time with each of you. As you develop your own parenting plan, try to understand your child's true feelings, including what's behind her desire for equal time and what will work best in your family situation.
- While joint physical custody may be best in a given situation, it requires consistency and a willingness for you to resolve your differences away from your child. It also requires you to share all of the tasks of parenting and help your child and each other transfer your child's things (school supplies, athletic equipment, etc.) from one house to the other without conflict.
- Your time-share needs to promote your strengths, while giving each of you time alone to recover from the divorce.

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- While joint physical custody may be best in a given situation, it requires consistency and a willingness for you to resolve your differences away from your child. It also requires you to share all of the tasks of parenting and help your child and each other transfer your child's things (school supplies, athletic equipment, etc.) from one house to the other without conflict.
- Your time-share needs to promote your strengths, while giving each of you time alone to recover from the divorce.

- Exchanges should *minimize* your child's exposure to conflict. School or other neutral places are excellent transition places between Mom's house and Dad's house.
- You must find ways to keep your children out of the middle of your conflicts. Do not have your child deliver messages to the other parent, or ask your child to tell you what the other parent is doing. Communication needs to be between the parents only, even if this requires help from a neutral professional. More on that in chapter 7.
- To the extent you can, there should be a plan for co-parenting. If your conflict is more extreme, a pattern of parallel parenting and avoidance of each other is best (refer to the discussion of parenting styles in chapter 2).

### ***Adolescents (13 - 17 years)***

The major task of the adolescent is developing greater independence and separation from the family. Many adolescents are oppositional and negative. Just as with the toddler, adolescents often express resistance and rebelliousness while forming their identity. Healthy adolescents function well in school, have self-confidence, and positive peer relationships. They talk with their parents about life goals, and they begin to plan for driving and dating, as well as college and careers. As a group, adolescents tend to be somewhat moody. At times, they may feel overwhelmed by pressure from many sources, including friends and school. They often use poor judgment, and may feel insecure. Their ideas, values, and goals may change considerably over the course of junior and senior high school. However, these years can be exciting ones as your teen grows into a productive and idealistic individual young adult.

Constant adjustment and conflict puts this population at potential risk for academic failure, eating and sleeping disorders, depression, suicide, delinquency, promiscuity, or substance abuse. To make matters worse, the signs of these symptoms may not be obvious to others.

When a divorce occurs at this age, teens worry about the loss of their family life. They tend to feel responsible, guilty, and angry for the way the divorce affects them. Children of this age tend to be naturally self-centered, and the divorce is a disruption in their lives. Many teens avoid *both* parents after a separation, especially if the parents are burdening them with loyalty conflicts and adult problems.

Some adolescents want little or nothing to do with their parents. This may be the result of alienation by one parent. Sometimes it is the result of frustration with the conflict; sometimes it

relates to the moral outrage felt toward one parent's behavior; sometimes it is the result of legitimate frustration that has built up over a long, painful relationship. When an older adolescent (15 - 17) is adamant about how he wants the parenting plan to be, it is important for parents to listen to him (unless, of course, it is unhealthy or unsafe). Parents do not want to set up a situation that may encourage an adolescent to rebel (any more than adolescents do normally!).

Parenting plans for children of this age group should include the following considerations:

- A time share plan which incorporates a range of possibilities. Many adolescents prefer one primary home (in large part to avoid confusion for their friends), and weekends or evenings with the other parent. Some will prefer a balanced, fifty-fifty plan with their parents. Much of this will depend on the history of the relationships with each of you and your availability to meet their needs. At times, adolescents may use one parent's home to get a break from the other. More than anything, your adolescent will usually want a say in your parenting plan.
- If you have more than one child you may need a different schedule for each child. If that is the case, you may want a schedule that allows all of your children to be together at certain times.
- You need to manage your conflicts away from your teen and maintain healthy limits with them. Confiding in adult issues with your teen only increases her risk of feeling overwhelmed by your divorce.
- In cases of severe high-conflict, your teen will probably detach from both of you. She may need other appropriate supportive adults. In such cases a therapist, friend's parent, or school counselor may need to monitor and assess risks.

### ***Sample Calendar Arrangements***

Take a look at these sample calendar arrangements that many parents use to develop parenting plans. Keep in mind that any one of these might be good for your family; you might need to try several until you find the one that works best. When your children are younger, use a large calendar in each home that is color-coded to help them identify where they will be going. As they grow, this helps them plan activities and let friends know where they will be. Keep in mind your child's needs will change as she gets older, and your schedule might need to be adjusted. If you talk and listen to your child, you will hopefully find a schedule that balances your lifestyles with your child's needs.

Each of these calendar segments will reflect a four-week cycle. You will notice a pattern to them, and they should be repeated. While I may designate Mom (M) or Dad (D) in different time slots, remember that it's the child's welfare that is important, not the needs of either parent. (Holidays and other adjustments are discussed more fully in chapter 2.)

**Primary Parent Schedule** *(preferable if before the divorce your child had one primary parent)*

This schedule will provide your child frequent and continuing contact with the other parent. With younger children, rather than one midweek overnight, consider a Tuesday and Thursday dinner visit, reserving overnights for the weekends.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
M	M	D	M	M	M	M
M	M	D	M	D	D	D
M	M	D	M	M	M	M
M	M	D	M	D	D	D

If you have a very young child (less than 18 months) and one primary parent, you will probably want to start by gradually increasing her time with the other parent. You might introduce four-hour blocks of time with the other parent to play and nurture the child, gradually increasing to six- or eight-hour blocks of time. These should probably be at least every third day, if possible. On weekends, you might consider two days in a row as a way of emphasizing the developing relationship. Then, as you find that your child is comfortable with the other parent, and comfortable with being away from the primary parent, you can begin to introduce overnights. As your child reaches age three, he can probably adjust to one of the plans described below (either 3-4-4-3 or traditional).

**3-4-4-3 Schedule**

*(Generally good for a younger child with two relatively equal homes and a temperament that can tolerate overnights. This schedule requires good communication between the parents.)*

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
M	M	M	D	D	D	D
M	M	M	M	D	D	D
M	M	M	D	D	D	D
M	M	M	M	D	D	D

**2-2-5-5 Schedule** (Good for school-aged or adolescent children with two relatively equal homes and a desire to spend equal time with each parent. For many children, it can be better than a week-week schedule, since they are never away from either parent for longer than five days.)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
M	M	D	D	M	M	M
M	M	D	D	D	D	D
M	M	D	D	M	M	M
M	M	D	D	D	D	D

**Week - Week Schedule** (Good for equal parenting plans and children who can tolerate a full week away from each parent. Some parents schedule a midweek dinner or overnight visit with the other parent, but for some children this can be more disruptive than the 2-2-5-5 schedule above.)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
M	M	M	M	M	M	M
D	D	D	D	D	D	D
M	M	M	M	M	M	M
D	D	D	D	D	D	D

### **School-Year / Summer Schedule**

When parents live in separate communities it can be difficult to plan a schedule. If you have a long-distance relationship, your child will need to be in one home during the school year, and visit the other parent during non-school time. Consider the travel time and your child's age and activities when you develop your schedule. If you are the "summer parent," try and spend some time with your child every three months. If your child is young, you might need to do most of the traveling. Once your child is old enough to travel by himself, it's still important to come visit him at least once or twice a year. Use three-day weekends for monthly contact during the school year if you live close enough, or longer holiday breaks such as Thanksgiving or Easter if you live farther away.

If you are the "school year parent" and live a long distance from the other parent, try and enroll your child in a year-round school. This allows for more frequent travel to be with the other parent, yet won't take her away for as long as the traditional summer break. Consider the logistics in both communities, since working parents need daycare or planned activities when children come to visit. Your child is likely to do well if she has all but one week of each break with the long-distance parent. That leaves her some time to be with friends in her home community and time for vacation trips with each parent.

If your child is in a typical school-year/summer-vacation schedule, she is likely to have two weeks of vacation at Christmas, another week or two during the spring or near Easter, and about twelve weeks off in the summer. If she's under age eight, consider having an equal split of the Christmas break, and most spring breaks with the long-distance parent. Try breaking up the summer into three segments: the first and third with the long-distance parent and the middle one with the home parent. This may prevent her from feeling homesick during her trips. If she's older and used to being away from home, she might do well spending most of the summer with the long-

distance parent, assuming she enjoys it there and has a good relationship with that parent. Both of you need to consider her interests, summer camp desires, and vacation needs as you develop your plan.

It's important for you to know that many children whose parents live in two different communities grow to resent the travel. Talk to your child about the travel, and look for positive ways to manage the relationship. If you think that your child is tiring of the travel, consider doing more of it yourself. A change of custody, even if just for a couple of years, might help your child feel a sense of belonging in both communities. You might also consider using mediation or an evaluation (more on this in chapter 7) to help you if you can't decide together how to manage long-distance visits. This is especially helpful if your child is reluctant to share his feelings about the travel because he's afraid of hurting your feelings. Talking with your child about his feelings will help him know that you care about him and help him make the adjustment to your lives in separate cities.



## Personality Traits of Parents And Developmental Needs of Children in High-Conflict Families

by Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

Many families do not fit patterns of domestic violence, yet they experience a high degree of conflict. Many high-conflict families may experience intermittent outbursts of anger or violence. Even when they do not exhibit violent patterns, these families are so conflicted that they routinely go back to court to solve what should be relatively simple problems. They may have problems scheduling holidays and vacations; they may argue during exchanges; they cannot communicate about child-related issues or decide on day-care providers; they disagree on the times and places for exchanging the children and argue about who will attend parent-teacher conferences, arrange and pay for health care, or attend the child's extra-curricular activities; and they may disagree on activities for their children.

In many ways, it appears that the life of the child must stop while the arguments between the parents continue. For many of these families, every issue becomes a potential source of conflict. Sometimes this is related to the history of the relationship and the power dynamics between the parents. Sometimes one parent will not let go of the conflict because this keeps them "together" in their relationship (albeit a destructive one).

This article focuses on the way in which conflict is driven by each parent's respective personality traits, the lack of a system for resolving conflicts, or both. Decisions may get made by the more forceful parent when one parent "gives in" to the other. Sometimes, no rational decision gets made, such as when one parent takes the child to the pediatrician and the other does the same after the exchange because they don't trust each other to communicate medical information to each other. In such situations, children may see two pediatricians when one will do and no therapist when one is needed. Teachers become frustrated with the lack of cooperation toward the child's schooling. I have seen many instances in which children are enrolled in two different kindergartens because parents cannot plan adequately together for their child's education. Such parents have not learned to implement a system for communication, problem solving, and decision-making. They do things the same way that they have for years. Often one parent does give in. Sadly, this may be the healthier parent. While this article is designed to give an overview on the dynamics of high-conflict families and appropriate interventions, I refer readers to Johnston & Roseby's book *In the Name of the Child* (Free Press, 1997) for a more in-depth understanding of high-conflict parents and the impact on children.

Research on high-conflict families (Johnston [1988, 1993, 1994] and Johnston & Roseby [1997]) reveals a continuum of problems and a variety of factors which contribute to the problems. Some families are mildly entrenched in conflict and can benefit from guidance and structured recommendations. The more difficult of these families may seem to make little progress, even with rather extensive intervention (e.g. therapy and case management). Some parents have personality traits which exacerbate conflicts, perhaps exaggerating or being quite rigid. In the next section, I will focus

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<sup>1</sup> This article is excerpted and adapted from Philip Stahl's books *Complex Issues in Child Custody Evaluations* © Sage Publications, 1999 and *Parenting After Divorce* © Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D., 2000. It was originally published in the Academy of Certified Family Law Specialists Newsletter, Winter Issue, 1999, Number 3, pp. 8 - 16.

on the way in which the parent's respective personality traits contribute to the degree and nature of the conflict.

### The Nature of Personality Disturbances

Over the past twenty years, a growing body of literature has developed on personality styles, in particular Narcissistic and Borderline styles. Millon (1996) not only focused on the disorders themselves, but those personality traits and features which impact upon relationships, rather than the individual. He has grouped personality disorders into four types. Many custody evaluators observe that most high-conflict families have one or both parents who exhibit either narcissistic, obsessive-compulsive, histrionic, paranoid, or borderline features. They may have parents who become rigid in their perception of the other and tend to deal with things in their extremes. Many parents are polarized, viewing themselves as all good and the other as all bad. These parents focus on the traits within the other parent that reinforce this perception, and they approach each new conflict as verification of just how difficult the other parent is. These parents experience chronic externalization of blame, possessing little insight into their own role in the conflicts. They usually have little empathy for the impact of this conflict on their children. They routinely feel self-justified, believing that their actions are best for their children. No matter how much the helping professionals try to keep the focus on the child, these parents remain focused on the conflict.

While these parents tend to be motivated by a diverse set of emotions, I believe that most of them take this rather rigid position out of fear, often the overwhelming fear that if they let down their defenses, they will be taken advantage of. Many parents say, "If I just give in this one time, she will always take advantage of me," or "if I give him an inch, he'll take a mile." Many parents fear being controlled by the other parent. For the more disturbed of these parents, giving in may represent a fear of annihilation or loss of self. This rigidity assures conflict. Because these families routinely go back to court, they are also afraid that any relaxing of their position might give the other parent an advantage in court. What gets lost in the conflict is the needs of the children. Another source of the fear is that winning or losing is so integrally tied to self esteem. Narcissistic parents fear losing custody and control, lest they feel abandoned and depressed. Borderline parents must win in order to contain their internal chaos and rage. While losing might mean different things to each parent (e.g. shame, loss, abandonment, rage, etc.) the key ingredient is how **unbearable** such a loss is to each parent. Other difficult parents may be irresponsible, over-reactive, and rigid. Parents with these personality traits often have high-conflict marriages and divorces.

Judges and attorneys express their extreme frustration with these families. I have heard judges refer to these families as "our frequent fliers," adding that, even though they may only number ten percent of the families, they require ninety percent of the court's resources. They might come back to court several times a year, and just it appears that a settlement has been reached, a new issue will arise. Lacking a reasonable dispute resolution mechanism, these parents feel justified in taking the other to court and letting "the judge settle it." Each issue is perceived as a new opportunity for victory, and feared as potential loss. These characterological personality dynamics, along with each parent's righteous self-justification and fear, create the high degree of conflict, and the perpetuation of the court battle.

At the same time, away from the conflict, many of these parents seem concerned for their children's needs and feelings and are capable of good parenting skills. They may be nurturing and set reasonable limits with their children. They are frequently involved in their child's day-to-day activities, participate in school work, and provide encouragement to their children. Many of these parents can be loving, spontaneous, and supportive to their children, even when they are cold, rigid, angry, and fearful toward the other parent. In the abstract, they understand the value of the child's relationship with the other parent, and they may even recognize that the conflict is problematic for their children. Despite this acknowledgment, it is difficult for them to relax their rigid positions and attitudes toward the other parent and extricate their child (and themselves) from the conflict.

For many high-conflict families, it seems that the parents' characterological personality dynamics get manifested in a relationship disorder with the other parent. They may be able to manage some of their chronic traits, including their narcissism, over-reaction, rigidity, and anger, in some of their other relationships. They may be pleasant to co-workers, showing few pathological traits in their work environment. With their children, they may not personalize experiences or show signs of narcissistic injury.

In contrast, the history of the conflict, the emotions of the divorce, and the fear of letting go bring out the worst in these parents with each other. It appears that the couple's relationship has been unable to withstand the previous love, the loss of that love, and the rejection and hurt that followed. In the newly formed divorce relationship, dysfunctional personality traits flourish, while in other relationships, including with the children, healthier personality traits may abound. For the less disturbed of these parents, the pathological personality traits may only surface in the context of the conflictual relationship between the parents. Each parent's negative individual traits clash and the conflicts continue. Left unchecked, these families return to court year after year to solve what might appear to the neutral observer to be the most minor of issues.

These families require strategies and interventions that assist them in taking care of their children and reducing their conflict. These strategies can include some or all of the following:

1. Neutral Decision-Making (Special Master)

In a variety of jurisdictions, including Northern California (Special Masters), Maricopa County, Arizona (Family Court Advisors), Boulder, Colorado (case managers or binding arbitrators), and New Mexico ("wise persons"), courts have begun to use attorneys and mental health practitioners as neutral decision-makers to assist families in such day-to-day disputes. While these families frequently return to court, the court system is incapable of handling the types or frequency of problems that these families bring. Instead, they require the assistance of a decision-maker who acts on behalf of the children. This person is empowered by the family and the court to act on behalf of the children and resolve conflicts in an expeditious manner. If neither parent has control, both can relax their fear of being taken advantage of by the other. While each parent may periodically become frustrated with the decisions of the neutral decision-maker, each parent usually trusts that person more than the other parent.

It appears that there are three primary benefits for this role. These include helping families more quickly resolve their differences, unclogging the courts from some of their most difficult families, and

helping families with very young children manage the nuances of integrating changing developmental needs of the child into their parenting plan. The major task of the Special Master is to make decisions that help a family stay out of court and keep their children out of the middle of the conflict. Special Masters need to be decisive. Just as young children often have difficulty sharing, divorced parents often have difficulty sharing their children. While the Special Master needs to understand the parents' position and feelings, it is more important for the Special Master to make decisions that are in the child's interest, without taking a lot of time.

## 2. Parallel Parenting

A second intervention involves parallel parenting. Psychologists describe young children who play next to each other, but interact very little with each other to be in "parallel play". In the same way, parents who parent their children at different times, but who have little or no direct interaction, are engaged in parallel parenting. This occurs when they engage in the same tasks, as long as they have little or no contact with one another.

While much of the divorce literature focuses on co-parenting, in which parents communicate and work with one another to raise their children in a cooperative fashion, high-conflict families fail miserably at this task. Each parent usually thinks his/her style is the only way to parent and is often quite critical of the other. Interactions stimulate the conflict, reducing benefits to the children.

The goal of parallel parenting is to reduce the level of conflict and make sure that the tasks of parenting are accomplished by one or both parents. It is important for parents, in conjunction with the courts and/or neutral decision-maker to specify which parent is responsible for various parenting tasks. Parents need to develop a plan that identifies how each parent will participate in the child's extracurricular activities, help with school work, take care of medical needs, etc. Plans are developed to insure that parents communicate with each other with less conflict. Fax machines and/or e-mail may be used when the conflict is high. Each parent is encouraged to develop his/her separate routine and structure. With such a plan, for example, the child will not be exposed to both parents attending the same field trip and making things miserable with their conflict.

To help these parents disengage and then learn to work together, it can be helpful for the neutral decision-maker to meet with the parents periodically and develop a schedule of the child's activities and each parent's participation in those activities. The Special Master can focus on the process of parallel parenting and help parents to disengage from conflict. Together, they can develop routines for the child and help coordinate a similar routine in each household, schedule times for phone calls between children and the other parent and assist each parent in doing those tasks that each parent does best. With this process, there are no winners or losers, and the child benefits from separate and parallel interaction with both parents, reducing the extent to which children are exposed to conflict. Once a neutral decision-maker is in place, and the process of parallel parenting is assured, parents can detach from each other and reduce the intensity of their conflict.

## 3. Structured Recommendations

A third important intervention for these families is providing structured recommendations. For high-conflict families, a lack of specificity promotes parental conflict, and conflict breeds insecurity for the children. Attorneys should recommend and the court needs to adopt specific and concrete plans to assist parents in fulfilling the tasks of parallel parenting and reducing the likelihood that they remain engaged in conflict. The more specific these plans are, the more parents can understand the rules and avoid conflict.

These parents need a lengthy and detailed parenting plan, giving less room for each parent to manipulate or feel manipulated by the other. The rules are quite clear. In the event of a dispute, it will be relatively easy for the Special Master to resolve. The recommendation should also include a provision that the neutral decision-maker can make adjustments or modifications in the event of certain situations, such as a family emergency, a special longer vacation, the children's summer schedule, or the needs of one or more family members.

Typically, flexibility is not workable for these high-conflict families without a dispute resolution mechanism such as a neutral decision-maker since flexibility is a breeding ground for new conflict. Parents can feel more comfortable with a structured recommendation if it can be adjusted in the event a specific need arises. For some families, the level of conflict does not get resolved for years. Neither parent trusts the neutral decision-maker, and the use of a neutral decision-maker only provides one more opportunity for engaging in conflict and battles over power and control. Those families will require a very structured court order that leaves little room for dispute, and potential sanctions from the court in the event that either parent violates the order. Those families will have no room for flexibility, unless mutually agreed-upon. In contrast, many high-conflict parents do trust the neutral decision-maker, benefit from a clear and precise order, and are encouraged by parallel parenting. They neutralize their balance of power and reduce the likelihood for conflict to erupt in front of the children. Because the neutral decision-maker can make decisions (e.g., whether or not the child will participate in Little League and how each parent can participate with the child) in a timely way, the child's life is less likely to be halted or disrupted by the conflict.

### Developmental Needs of Children

#### Infants and Toddlers (0 - 3 years)

During this stage, the foundations of basic trust and relationships are formed. In the first year of life, children develop initial attachment(s), a necessary precursor for the development of basic trust. By the end of the first year, receptive language skills are developing and the infant's personality is starting to form. Once a predictable, secure relationship with a primary attachment figure has been secured, the infant begins to separate from that primary parent to form his/her own personality. This process is often referred to as "separation-individuation". During the toddler years, children begin developing autonomy and experimenting with separation, starting to assert themselves. Their emotions are quite volatile. By age three, if all goes well, emotions settle down, language skills are intact, and they are likely to be toilet trained. They are ready for a burst of psychological growth which will take place over the next three years.

Children in this age group require predictability, consistency, and routine. When a divorce occurs during this time, there is a loss which the child cannot understand. This can be pronounced if there is a major disruption in the consistency of the existing primary attachment relationship(s). Symptoms may include regression, problems with feeding, sleeping, self-soothing, and irritability. Some of these children become depressed and withdrawn, especially because they cannot express their loss in words. Separation anxiety for children in this age group can become exaggerated. If one or both parents becomes depressed, which is quite common, basic care may be diminished.

Children at this age are at risk for more serious regression or developmental delays if the basic care giving is lacking due to depressed or disturbed parents. It is not uncommon for young, possibly immature adults (aged 18 - 25) to have babies. Sometimes they never lived together, or they may have separated during the first two years of the child's life. The developmental needs of the children may become impacted by the maturity level of the parents. Rather than the idea of "one psychological parent", or a "primary parent", recent research supports that children can have a hierarchy of attachment figures, all of whom have importance for children in their post-divorce adjustment. Some children do have one primary parent that has attended to the majority of day-to-day needs. Other children may have two or three adults (2 parents and a day-care provider) who have attended to day-to-day needs. Children in this age group need a parenting plan reflecting the following:

1. The child's relationship with a primary parent is of major importance during these first three years of life.
2. Children up to 18 months old need stability and security in the primary attachment relationship(s).
3. Children can develop within normal limits when separated from the primary parent to be with the other parent. This will be affected by the extent to which each parent has been directly involved in the child's life.
4. The attachment(s), parenting skills, and environment are important. Frequent, shorter visits may be ideal. Overnights may need to be limited in the first year of life if there has been one primary parent.
5. With increased capacity for memory and cognition, many children in the group from 18 - 36 months who have had one primary attachment may begin to tolerate and benefit from overnight time with the other parent.
6. It may be difficult to develop a relatively equal parenting plan for children in this age group since there may be too many transitions and disruptions to the primary attachments.
7. The children who do best with relatively equal parenting plans seem to be those children with an easy temperament who have parents that are supportive of one another and exchange their child with little conflict. Children who have disorganized or anxious attachments may need one primary parent. Other key factors are similar routines in each household, relative stability of the transitions, and parents who can communicate about the child and his/her developmental, medical, and emotional needs. This communication must allow the parents to be sufficiently responsive to the child and his/her needs. These parents need to have the capacity to help each other understand the infant, work together to develop routines that are familiar to the infant, collaborate on soothing techniques, help each other as language emerges, and reassure each other in their respective parenting techniques. Such parents must be flexible in their response to the child's changing needs. Such a pattern is used in healthy intact families and if it is used in a

separated family, the shared parenting plan will be natural for the child and his/her development.

8. When parents are in significant high-conflict, very young children appear to benefit the most from schedules that resemble their pre-separation patterns of contact with each parent. While neither parent needs to be considered the primary parent, the child needs predictability in his/her environment until the conflict can settle down.

#### Preschoolers (3 - 5 years)

During this stage, the child is developing a better ability to understand language, relationships, and feelings. Children of this age are making significant progress in their cognitive skills and peer relationships. Sex role identification is developing. If the separation-individuation process has been healthy, children of this age can be expected to expand their horizons, go to preschool and make friendships. These children are often delightful, learning to manage their feelings and being inquisitive about everything. If attachments and care-giving are secure, these children will be ready to venture off to kindergarten with good self esteem and confidence.

On the other hand, preschoolers are at risk for fairly serious regression when attachments are anxious and they do not understand the conflicts of their parents. They may become easily confused and do not understand what is occurring around them. Developmental delays and regression in toileting, sleeping and feeding are common. They may experience irritability and clinging behavior. Some children become depressed and withdrawn. Nightmares may become more pronounced. Self confidence may suffer and there can be increases in aggressive and anxious behaviors. Many of the children in this age group worry about their parents and may try to act "perfect". They may do this out of fear or they may be unconsciously taking care of their parents. We may be seeing the early signs of parentified behavior, in which they care emotionally for their parents, ignoring their own needs. A certain amount of this behavior is normal during the early stages of divorce, but when such behaviors are many, or extend for more than a year, this could reflect a more serious adjustment problem for the child.

These children need parenting plans consistent with the following:

1. Continued focus on predictability, routine and structure for the child.
2. Children aged three and older can certainly tolerate overnight contact with each parent.
3. Discipline and routine needs to be consistent in each parent's home.
4. Parents will need to share information about the child and his/her eating, sleeping, toileting, medical, and social / emotional functioning.
5. Children need freedom from direct exposure to parental conflict. If the parents continue to be in conflict, parents might consider using neutral sites (e.g. school or day-care) for transitions and neutral decision-makers.
6. Children in this age group often benefit from longer blocks of time with each parent that enables them to be settled in routines at each home. Many of these children do not do well with frequent transitions.
7. In this age group, parents need to put their needs secondary to the child's. While the non-custodial parent may want longer blocks of time with their younger child, many children of this age still need a primary home. This is dependent on the quality of attachments, whether parents

are consistent and relatively free of conflict, and whether the child is experiencing significant vulnerability and stress.

8. There may be situations in which each parent has some pathology or parenting flaws, **but each offers the child something the other does not**. In those cases, it is important to have a parenting plan that maximizes each parent's strengths while minimizing the extent to which the child is exposed to the pathology.

#### School - Aged Children (6 - 12 years)

This is an age in which children thrive on structure and routine. Peer relationships are growing, and they are learning to master social rules. Creativity continues to grow and these children are adept at making up games with unique rules. Rules are important as these children focus on fairness in their life. Socialization and being part of a group are important to children of this age. They are learning to better understand and express their feelings and master cognitive and academic skills. They can be quite silly at times and still prefer to play much of the time. They are learning skills in such areas as academics, sports, music, dance, art, etc. Self esteem grows when they function well in school, on the playground, and in the family. It is not uncommon for children of this age to have different relationships with each parent, preferring mom for some things and dad for others.

Divorce brings many challenges to children of this age. Younger school-aged children tend to feel the loss of the family and may experience sadness and crying, often longing for the return of the family unit. Older children in this age-range may be likely to experience anger and use alignment to mobilize self-esteem. Children of this age often feel directly responsible for the divorce, especially if they perceive that conflict focused on them. These children may exhibit multiple symptoms, including tantrums, regression, sleep problems, acting out, behavioral and academic problems in school, withdrawal or aggression with peers, and depression. This is a population that believes in fairness, and wants to please their parents. They feel overwhelmed by their parent's conflict and usually try to fix it, yet they are ill equipped to do so. When a parent is depressed, these children are at risk for parentified behavior in which they emotionally care for that parent.

In extreme high-conflict families, this population may present as asymptomatic on the surface, but feel overwhelmed and vulnerable underneath. These children are at risk for emotional splitting in which one parent is "all-good" and the other is "all-bad". They often feel stuck by the loyalty conflicts and may become emotionally constricted, worrying about their parents. Alignments which were natural in the pre-divorce family become highlighted, increasing their risk of alienation. These children have difficulty maintaining a strong internalized self-image as a result of the conflict. They may become overwhelmed and disorganized, struggling with the different emotions and behaviors of each parent.

It is not uncommon for children to hear one parent blame the other or hear different explanations from each parent for things which they experience. For example, when one parent says, "I don't know why your mother doesn't call you when you're here. She probably doesn't care much for you," and the other parent says, "I called you three times last night, why didn't you call back? Doesn't your dad give you the messages?" this is quite confusing to children, who do not know which parent to believe.



These children need a parenting plan which encompasses the following concepts:

1. A structured and consistent time-share that assures access to each parent, when indicated. Optimal parenting plans range from 35 - 65 % of time with either parent (and thus a primary home) to 50/50 joint physical custody in which the child is with each parent about ½ of the time. While children often express a wish for equal time with their parents, this may simply be to keep things fair.
2. While joint physical custody may be best in a given situation, I believe it requires a degree of consistency and a willingness for the parents to resolve their conflicts away from the child. It also requires the parents to share all of the tasks of parenting and help the child and each other transfer the child's things (school supplies, athletic equipment, etc.) from one house to the other without conflict.
3. The time-share needs to promote each parent's strengths, while giving each parent time alone to recover from the divorce on his/her own.
4. Exchanges need to minimize the extent to which the child is exposed to the conflict. School or other neutral places are excellent transition places between mom's house and dad's house.
5. The parents need a plan for conflict resolution that keeps the children out of the middle. Children should not be messengers or spies for their parents. Communication needs to be by and through the parents, with the aid of a neutral professional when required.
6. To the extent the parents can do it, there should be a plan for co-parenting. For those parents in which the conflict is more extreme, a pattern of parallel parenting and detachment from each other will be optimal.

For those families in which the co-parenting relationship is relatively free of conflict, the children have a strong attachment to each parent and are adjusting well and both parents are relatively equal in their attachments, some form of joint physical custody is often ideal.

However, given the potential for children being caught up in the middle of the conflict, and given the risk of alignment and alienation in children of this age, such a plan will not always work. Instead, when the child is exposed to too much conflict, when the child is not managing his/her stress very well, when the routines in each parent's home are significantly different, or when one or both parents struggles to empathize with the child and maintain healthy parent-child boundaries, the child is likely to need a primary home, with blocks of time in the other parent's home to assure continuity and growth of each parent-child relationship..

#### Adolescents (13 - 17 years)

The major task of the adolescent is developing greater independence and autonomy from the family. Their separation-individuation process is similar to that of the two-year-old. There can be a tendency to act with oppositional and negative behaviors. Just as with the toddler, adolescents express some resistance and rebelliousness while forming their identity. Healthy adolescents function well in school, have self confidence, and strong peer relationships. They learn to talk with their parents about life goals and they begin to plan for driving, working, and college or vocational school. As a group, adolescents tend to be somewhat moody and reactive in their emotions. They may feel overwhelmed by pressure from their peers, use poor judgement, and be socially insecure. Their ideas, values, and goals

are in a state of turmoil and may change considerably over their junior high and high school years. However, these years can be exciting ones as teens grow into productive and idealistic individuals.

However, with this considerable internal adjustment, this is a population at potential risk. This is true for adolescents of intact families as well as with families of divorce. When a divorce occurs at this age, teens worry about the loss of their family life. They tend to feel a blend of responsibility and guilt, and anger for the way it has affected them. Children of this age tend to be self-centered naturally, and the divorce becomes a disruption to them. They may avoid both their parents, especially if the parents are burdening them with loyalty conflicts and adult problems. When there is a pattern of high-conflict, children in this age-group are at risk for persistent academic failure, depression, suicide, delinquency, promiscuity, or substance abuse. With their ability to see things more abstractly, they become much more aware of their parents' flaws. This may lead to a more rapid destruction of their idealized view of their parents, resulting in anxiety and anger. This anger may take a fairly self-righteous stance and adolescents may resist contact with the parent whose flaws have been significantly exposed.

Some adolescents want little or nothing to do with one of his/her parents. This must be understood completely. Sometimes, it is the result of alienation by one parent; sometimes, it is the result of frustration with the conflict; sometimes it relates to the moral indignation of the parent's divorce-related behavior; and sometimes, it is the result of legitimate frustration that has built over a long relationship of pain. When an older adolescent (15 - 17) is adamant about how he/she wants the parenting plan to be, this must be seriously considered. Courts do not want to set up a situation which may encourage an adolescent to rebel (any more than he/she would anyway).

Adolescents need parenting plans which reflect the following:

1. A time-share plan which incorporates a range of possibilities. Many adolescents prefer one primary home, in large part to avoid confusion for their friends. For many of these teens, they will want weekends or evenings with the other parent. Some will prefer a balanced, 50/50 plan with their parents. Much of this will depend on the prior history of the relationships with each parent and the availability of the parents to meet their needs. At times, adolescents use one parent's home to get a break from the other. More than anything, adolescents will often want a say in the parenting plan.
2. Adolescents may require a different schedule than siblings. This can depend on a number of variables, including the adolescent's wishes.
3. A statement about the need for any possible support services such as therapy, substance abuse counseling, tutoring, or other such needs.
4. To the extent this is relevant, statements about the need for the parents to manage their conflicts away from the teen and maintain healthier boundaries with them. To the extent that one or both parents is confiding adult issues to the teen, this should be discouraged.
5. In cases of severe high-conflict, the teen's autonomy and detachment from both parents may be critical. The adolescent may need to find other appropriate supportive adults may also be indicated. These teens may require someone to monitor and assess the ongoing risks.

### Children's Reactions to Parental Conflict

The extent of children's reactions is dependent on many variables, including:

1. the age of the child,
2. the intensity and chronicity of the conflict,
3. the degree of violence or fear of violence associated with the conflict,
4. the degree and length of time in to which the child has been exposed to all of the conflict or just fragments of it, and
5. the psychological health of the child.

In general, a history of aggression and conflict in the family has been strongly and consistently associated with emotional, behavior, and social problems in children. While children from these families have more adjustment problems than normally expected, the range for individuals is broad. Kline, Johnston, & Tschann (1991) and Johnston (1994) suggest that a good parent-child relationship can buffer children from interparental conflict. Individual characteristics of the child (e.g. a more adaptable temperament or better coping skills) may help the child be more resilient to the conflict. Johnston (1994) found that "an association between joint custody / frequent access and poorer child adjustment appears to be confined to divorces that are termed 'high-conflict'."

Very young children may be partially protected from the negative effects of conflict because they do not fully appreciate the conflict experience, but even they are susceptible to emotional distress, somatic complaints and regression in their development. Older pre-school children may be more likely to understand the conflicts and the feelings of their parents. Their reactions may include regression, confusion, sadness, low-self esteem and fear. They may avoid peer relationships and withdraw from their care-givers.

School-aged children are much more likely to have a range of reactions, starting with guilt. Children of this age often feel responsible for the conflicts of their parents. They show a greater frequency of externalizing (aggressive or delinquent) and internalizing (withdrawn or anxious) behaviors. This is a group that is highly susceptible to school problems, regression, and poor self esteem (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann [1989]). When there is violence associated with the high-conflict, boys in particular are at risk for delinquent acting out.

Adolescents who have been exposed to conflict and violence tend to be aggressive and have multiple behavior problems, including truancy, problems with authority, and revenge-seeking behaviors. They are at risk for drug abuse, promiscuity, social alienation, delinquency, and school failure. They may attach to destructive peer groups and gangs as a substitute for the family. Internalizing adolescents may feel suicidal, emotionally constricted, and numb to the pain that they feel.

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## Appendix A

### *Cooperative Parenting or Parallel Parenting?*<sup>1</sup>

Research on families of divorce suggest that there are primarily three styles of parenting for families after a divorce: *cooperative*, *conflicted*, or *disengaged*. *Cooperative* parenting is the style used by families in which conflict is low and parents can effectively communicate about their child. If you determine that your level of conflict is low, you and the other parent will probably be able to talk about your child's needs in a healthy way. You will probably agree on most parenting values, be relatively consistent in your parenting styles, and have few arguments about your child's life. You will rarely put your child in the middle, and you will solve differences peacefully. Research shows that children of divorce fare best when parents can be cooperative in their parenting. If you fall in this category, you should feel good about yourselves and know that you are helping your child immensely. There are many good books on cooperative parenting designed to help parents do a more effective job.

This book focuses on those parents who are in *conflict* and argue a lot or need to disengage in their parenting. Even if you can sometimes parent cooperatively, you find it to be difficult and are in conflict too much of the time. *Conflicted* parenting is the worst for children, who are often in the middle of the conflicts. Your children will adjust to your divorce easier if you can avoid conflicted parenting. Psychological issues that lead to conflicted parenting are many, and may include:

- continuation of hostility that began during the marriage
- differing perceptions of pre-separation child-rearing roles
- differing perceptions of post-separation child-rearing roles
- differing perceptions of how to parent
- concern about the adequacy of the other parent's parenting ability
- an unwillingness of one or both parents to accept the end of the relationship
- jealousy about a new partner in the other parent's life
- contested child custody issues
- personality factors in one or both parents that stimulate conflict.

Whatever the specific source, parents' inability to separate their parental roles from prior conflict in the marriage is often a significant contribution to the conflict after the divorce. This conflict is perhaps the most important variable in determining how your child adjusts to your divorce. Do whatever it takes to change your level of conflict. The first step in this process is to learn to *disengage* from the other parent. Disengagement is one of the possible styles of parenting after divorce. If you disengage, it's like you have developed a

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *Chapter 2 of Parenting After Divorce, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Impact Publishers, 2008). © Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D.

“demilitarized zone” around your children and have little or no contact with the other parent. When you disengage, you will avoid contact with the other parent so that conflict cannot develop. You must do this first to reduce the conflict and before you can move on to the next style of parenting.

The second step in this process is what I call *parallel parenting*. In this style of parenting, both of you will each learn to parent your child effectively, doing the best job each of you can do during the time you are with your child. You will continue to disengage from the other parent so that conflicts are avoided. If you determine that you cannot cooperatively parent because your level of conflict is moderate or high, disengagement and parallel parenting is the necessary style of parenting.

Parallel parenting gets its name from a similar concept in children’s play. Research psychologists have observed that young children who play together, but do not have the skills to interact, engage in a process of parallel play. If they are in a sandbox together or taking turns going down a slide, they play *next* to one another, not *with* one another. Each child is doing her own thing with the toys, and generally ignoring the other. When they get older, they will learn to interact cooperatively and play *together*.

Similarly, parallel parenting is a process of parenting next to one another because you are unable to parent together. Before you can learn to co-parent, you will each learn to parent on your own. The first step of parallel parenting is disengagement. This means that you will not communicate about minor things regarding your child. You will not bicker over things that have always led to conflicts in the past. You will give the other parent important information about your child, but you will not get into debates about the parenting plan or about each other’s parenting style.

“Important information” means the health, welfare, and interests of your child. If your child is sick, you will inform the other parent of this fact, with details on what medication is needed, what has already been administered, and when the next dose is to be given. If your child has a school field trip, you will inform the other parent of the details, and use your parenting plan to decide who might go with the child on the field trip. Each of you should develop independent relationships with your child’s teachers, doctors, coaches, and friends so that you don’t have to rely on the other parent for your information. Each of you should take turns taking your child to the doctor and dentist. If you are the parent who receives your child’s report card, copy it and send it to the other parent. Do this with medical and extra-curricular activity information, such as your child’s little league schedule. Do not complain to the other parent when she is ten minutes late for an exchange of your child, and don’t argue over whose turn it is to get your child’s next haircut. Have parameters in your parenting plan for some of these things and ignore the rest.

When parents are trying to disengage, but communication is necessary, it is often best if non-emergency communication is done by mail, fax or e-mail. Only use faxes if both

of you have sufficient privacy where you will receive the fax. By putting your communication in writing, you will have time to gather your thoughts and make sure that the tone is not argumentative. This also lets the receiving parent take some time and gather his thoughts so that he is not impulsive or angry in his response. Sarcasm is never helpful when trying to disengage from conflicts. Don't share your e-mails and faxes with your children; they are simply meant to share important information between the parents. Try to limit non-emergency communication to twice a month, except for sharing information that is time-sensitive (like faxing a notice from school to the other parent on the day you receive it). Obviously, emergency information about illnesses and injuries, unforeseen delays in visitation (as a result of traffic conditions, for example), or immediate school concerns should be shared by phone as soon as possible. However, by reducing general communication, and by putting necessary communications in writing, you will go a long way toward disengaging from conflict.

If you have very young children, you know it is important to share all aspects of your child's functions with the care provider when you drop her off. In the same way, it is critical for parents to share detailed information with each other upon the exchange of the child. A useful tool is a "parent communication notebook." In this notebook you will write down the highlights of your child's emotions and behaviors during the time she's with you. Fill out the notebook in great detail and pass it along to the other parent at the time of transition. Things to include in this notebook are your observations of your child's health, feeding and sleeping patterns, language issues, your child's mood, what soothes your child, what upsets your child, your daily routine, and any other detailed information about your child's functions and needs. This notebook should stay with your child so both parents can use it as a forum for preserving thoughts about your child and her needs.

Another step in parallel parenting is not telling the other parent how to parent, and ignoring (rather than arguing back) when the other parent tries to tell you how to parent. Support different styles of parenting in order to avoid conflict. Obviously, some things are very important, such as consistent discipline philosophies and techniques, adequate supervision, giving your child necessary medication, and ensuring that your child gets to school on time with homework completed. If you have concerns about these very important issues, you will need a forum for working out your differences.

There are many things that parents argue about that aren't so important. Some of this is related to different parenting philosophies and some of it is related to the difficulty of sharing your child. Accept that there is more than one "right way" to parent. Learn to be less rigid and more accepting of your child's other parent. Rather than trying to change how the other parent does his job of parenting, do your best job of parenting during the time your child is with you, without criticizing the other parent. Children are capable of being parented in two different styles, and many children of divorce adjust quite well to two very different homes. Remember, just as you will want to avoid criticizing the other parent, you will not want to deal with criticism of your parenting techniques.