

Deciding It Is Over: The initial Stages

The first step in implementing a positive parenting approach is recognizing the relationship is over. This may not be a single event but sometimes an ongoing process. When you focus on it as an event, it's natural to want to gain control over it. But viewing it as an ongoing process, however, permits a broader perspective and greater flexibility. It is also important to remember that no two separations are alike. People enter and move through the various stages differently, and personal experiences will vary. While some general signposts are clear enough, there are no exact guidelines to describe each and every separation or to prescribe how individuals should deal with various situations and issues.

Whether your breakup is a divorce or the end of a committed relationship, the feelings of sadness and hurt are similar. For divorce, the initial stage occurs when one or both spouses decide that the marriage is over. Sometimes divorce is preceded by a physical separation, in which one spouse moves out of the family home. In other cases, parents live together until the divorce is final.

At some point, however, parents are faced with the task of establishing two separate households. Sometimes when both parents agree the romantic relationship is over, this next step can bring about a sense of relief—especially if the home environment was tense, stressful, or filled with the pain of continued arguments. Sometimes parents' best efforts to work on their relationship can actually create more stress. Parents often report noticing their children experiencing some emotional relief during the initial stages of the separation. If you notice signs of distress in your child or children, listen to their concerns, take them seriously, and remember that as they grow more familiar with having two homes, they should begin to feel better.

For many families, separating and establishing two households can be emotionally painful, especially if one or both parents do not want to separate. Positive parenting requires that parents take care of their own needs as they are caring for their children. Because parents who can successfully deal with their own emotional issues during this time are much better equipped to help their children, they should take time to work on the painful emotions that separating can engender. Those emotions may initially include fear, worry, anger, and frustration, to name just a few. Parents who do not have constructive outlets for their own emotions are more likely to express them in ways harmful to themselves and their children. Finding ways to discuss your feelings, get objective feedback, and receive encouragement can help you make balanced and healthy decisions for your kids.

Similarly, parents and children both suffer when parents' negative feelings lead them to treat each other poorly. Parents should strive to treat one another with respect. Since conflict is a normal part of life, it would be unrealistic not to anticipate disagreements. However, parents should actively engage in working out conflicts as long as it is done in a safe context for both of them, and as long as children are not present for escalating arguments. Positive parents make this one of their most important priorities at this stage of the process.

Most children, regardless of their age, either know or intuit that their parents are having difficulties. Still, it is important to limit their exposure to excessive arguing. Adults who experienced their parents fighting as young children often note excessive parent conflict as the most problematic aspect of their parents' break-up. Parental arguments in the children's presence usually leave the children feeling caught in the middle. Parents can minimize this hazard by making deliberate efforts to keep their conflicts away from the kids and by resisting the temptation to communicate with one another through the children. Children learn as much from their parents' break-up as from observing their relationship. Parents can help make those lessons positive ones by maintaining respectful and caring relationships with one another. When we speak about caring for your ex, we mean caring for your children's sake, not a romantic type of caring.

What is the best way to discuss the separation with our children?

A positive parenting approach focuses on communicating with your children in age-appropriate ways. Most experts agree that both parents together should speak with their children about the decision to end the relationship. It is certainly OK for children to see that parents are struggling emotionally. They must also see their parents successfully manage those difficult emotions. If one or both parents prefer or feel obligated to discuss the relationship ending separately, be honest with your children about what is happening, but speak in neutral terms.

Be sure not to assign blame to the other parent. As common-sense as this advice is, it is a very common trap for parents to fall into. In addition, let children know that they are not to blame for the divorce. Be prepared for a wide range of reactions, and make room for whatever responses they have. Do not necessarily expect their initial reaction to be permanent. Remember also, that most children ask a lot of the same questions repeatedly. This is a normal way of gaining a sense of security about their future. Try to curb your frustration and answer them lovingly and consistently.

Let children know often that both parents will always love them and that you will always be a family. The difference will be that Mom and Dad are living in separate homes. Remind your children that you will always support them in having relationships with both parents. Let them know that you are parents forever, and that they will never be abandoned. Remember that for younger children (between the ages of three and seven), short, clear explanations are best. For older kids, lengthier explanations may be appropriate, but be careful not to over-explain. Children will often perceive added details as a move toward getting them to take sides. It is important to remember here that your child's understanding will continually evolve with time. As children experience more of life, their ideas about relationships in general can change dramatically.

You should stress to your children that the separation is occurring because of differences between Mom and Dad. Always refrain from speaking badly about the other parent. To accomplish this, you must have other outlets to deal with difficult feelings regarding the other parent. You will ensure a quicker, healthier, adjustment when you are able to respect

and care for the other parent despite difficult feelings. Being able to do this will also aid in your own ability to move on and be happy.

Positive Parenting, at this early stage, requires parents to balance stability and change. You should make every effort to keep stability in your child's life while recognizing that transitions such as this is an opportunity for children to learn and accept change as a part of life. We can't always predict or choose when our children will get to learn certain life lessons. However, we can look for and embrace such opportunities when they arise.

How do we make decisions as parents living in separate households?

Co-parenting is the term used to describe the process of parents working together to meet the needs of their children. Co-parenting responsibilities apply to all people—whether they are single, married, divorced, adoptive, grandparent, guardian, or foster care—who are entrusted with the responsibility to care for children. Co-parenting, however, almost always takes more work, communication, and lifelong commitment than most people initially expect. Parents who understand the importance of co-parenting and learn effective co-parenting strategies greatly assist their children through the changes associated with separation and divorce. Whenever possible, both parents should be involved in the decisions that keep children safe, healthy, and thriving. Many parents, because of difficulties beyond their control, will be faced with making the majority of decisions themselves. For some, this is a relief because having the other parent's input would be more stressful. For other parents, this can be a source of stress because they are going it alone.

Some of the more important decisions parents should make together involve children's living location and arrangements, education, religion, discipline, medical treatment, finances, and emergencies, to name a few. Even parents who are happily married have different ideas about some or all of these issues. This is normal. It would be unrealistic to assume that divorced parents share the same ideas about all of these important issues either. Of utmost importance is how well you deal with differences when they arise. Do you get into a power struggle that you feel you must win? Are you willing to compromise? Are you willing to choose your battles? Are you willing to agree to disagree? Few parents are able to integrate these strategies when a separation or divorce is new. However, in time and with practice, they can become second nature. Let's take a close look at each of these below.

Power struggles are very common in relationships. Often, couples will continue a power struggle years after the court decision is final. The first step toward eliminating power struggles is awareness. Some parents experience this as, 'When I say 'up,' he says 'down''; 'when I say 'black,' she says 'white.'" When you identify this kind of pattern, at first just observe it in action. This observing can lead you to some very interesting and creative strategies for interrupting the escalating cycle.

Compromise is another essential tool for the positive parent. It means being willing to set aside some of your tightly held beliefs about your children and what is best for them. This is easier said than done. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for compromise to be contagious. Often, when one person begins to compromise, (especially in a relationship previously defined by power struggles), the other person begins to follow suit. Parents often ask how long they should compromise in the face of the parent who refuses to meet in the middle. Many parents in this situation justifiably continue to compromise, as the best way to address their children's best interests. Other parents find it necessary to stand up to the other parent and demand some concessions. You have to take what you know about your co-parent and the specific issue in question, and make the best decision for your family.

Most parents learn early on that child rearing requires you to choose your battles. You can't get upset at everything that goes wrong, or you will be upset most of the day. Similarly, focusing too much on the differences in parenting styles will be frustrating. Choosing your battles means identifying your priorities and reserving your passion for discussing these issues. For example, if you consider school a priority, you should discuss school-related concerns and challenges with the other parent. Consistent nightly bedtimes might be important to you, something you enforce in your home. However, avoiding this issue—especially when your co-parent has different ideas about bedtime—is a good idea.

Cultivating an atmosphere of cooperation is more important than agreement on any one issue. Usually, when emotions cool, and parents can be more objective, issues can be discussed in a more cooperative way. It is important to provide your co-parent with some flexibility and room to be a parent. Whenever possible, look for opportunities to compliment your co-parent on their parenting abilities. Start small and build on whatever is working well. This can help defuse stressful situations and lay the groundwork for future cooperation.

On the other hand, constant arguing among parents creates stress for everyone. Parents fighting to be right or to get their own way puts children in the middle, fostering angry feelings and difficulties in their own intimate relationships later in life. Relating maturely and with a healthy sense of respect for one another is simple but not easy. Your challenge as a divorcing parent is to help create a context where your children learn about love, life, change, and family relationships.

What do I do when my Co-Parent won't cooperate?

In cases of high conflict families, parallel parenting is one method of shared parenting that allows parents to have minimal contact with each other while maintaining relationships with their children. Parallel parenting may be a long-term or temporary solution until differences can be set aside and each can work together more directly.

In parallel parenting each parent has certain responsibilities they carry out in the day-to-day duties without involving the other parent depending on your parenting plan.

For example, parents can switch out attending their children's appointments and social events to minimize the time they have to spend with each other. This allows both parents to stay involved in their children's lives.

When parents successfully parent within a parallel parenting arrangement, it's important each maintain their end of the parenting agreement. When trust is restored, parents are more likely to put aside their differences and a more collaborative and cooperative parenting relationship becomes established. Parallel parenting can provide a foundation for cooperative parenting as parents move from disengagement and towards a more direct style of communication and negotiation.

The importance for children to have a safe and predictable relationship with both parents

Children, like adults but even more so, thrive on structure and stability. When our lives are stable we feel secure, and this security helps us feel good about ourselves. During this time of transition, parents can minimize the stress of these changes by planning ahead and involving children (in age-appropriate ways) with what is going on. Some changes children might experience include moving, changing schools, variations to normal routines, spending time with parents separately, making new friends, and adjusting to different schedules. The more areas you can keep stable, the better—especially sources of support like family, friends, and school.

When changes are inevitable, you'll want to discuss them with your children ahead of time. This will help reduce their stress levels. However, it would be unrealistic to think that a family can experience a divorce without any changes. Remember that learning about transitions in life is not a bad thing, and your child can learn valuable life lessons in adjusting to change. Take the opportunity to teach your children about change, and even share with them your own struggles. It cannot be overstated that the more parents are comfortable with and accepting of the changes they are facing, the more comfortable and accepting their children will be.

Keep in mind that it will take time to adjust to new schedules and routines. This adjustment period can last for several months. Do your best to anticipate this transition period, and make room for it. But don't worry; eventually your routine will begin to feel normal. You should also consider that each child will respond differently to the changes associated with a divorce. It is not uncommon for one child to be doing better than another initially. At some point, the reverse may be true. This is normal, and you should accept and acknowledge whatever reaction your child is experiencing in the present.

Keys to creating a healthy and stable home environment

- Provide structure and routine in your child's day.
- Communicate with children about impending changes.

- Balance the changes associated with divorce with your child's need for stability.
- Provide children with age-appropriate consequences when rules are broken.
- Do not speak to your co-parent through your children.
- When dealing with your co-parent, remember to compromise and choose your battles carefully.
- Refrain from arguing and excessive conflict in front of your children.
- Be your co-parent's biggest supporter (when it comes to your kids).
- Do not burden children with adult responsibilities.
- Take care of your own needs so you can be there for your kids.
- Encourage children to speak about their feelings but don't make it mandatory.
- Read books about parenting after divorce and moving on.

As we discussed, deciding it is over is rarely viewed as a single event. The process can be divided into three stages, each with specific implications for your children's health.

The first stage is the immediate crisis stage, which usually lasts two months to a year. For many children, this is a time of shock and disbelief. Even when parental conflict has been high, most children are surprised and often saddened their parents are breaking up. Their sense of stability, and their belief that their family will always be together, is altered. Conflict between parents is perhaps the most serious stressor during this phase. At this early stage, parents may spend less time with their children and be less sensitive to their children's needs. In most crisis situations, parents instinctively protect their children; but in this stage, parents are frequently preoccupied with their own issues and concerns. This is difficult for children, who often feel the most needy, sad, and anxious during this time.

In the short-term aftermath stage, which can last up to two years, the turmoil and shock of the first stage gives way to a deepening recognition of the realities of having two homes. Conflict and hostility between parents can be serious sources of stress for children. Older children are frequently used by their parents as allies, pawns, or go-betweens. Many parents, even without meaning to, burden their children with private, adult aspects of the divorce.

Some parents allow children to sleep in the parent's bed during this phase. Sleeping alone is a developmental achievement for children, and they acquire a firmer sense of independence, autonomy, and competence by being able to manage this type of separation from parents. Allowing younger children to sleep in a parent's bed on a short-term basis for comforting purposes is not necessarily harmful, but moving back to their own bed as soon as possible is usually advised.

The last stage is considered the long-range period. This may begin anywhere from two to three years after the initial separation and may be prolonged due to unresolved custody or financial battles. Many parents remarry during this stage, sometimes leading children to feel displaced. Also, children who get along well with a stepparent may struggle with feelings of

disloyalty toward their biological mother or father. Talk your children about these feelings, and in time, their discomfort should ease.

Book Resources:

Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs by Phillip Michael Stahl

BIFF for Co-Parent Communication: Your Guide to Difficult Texts, Emails, and Social Media Posts, by Bill Eddy, Annette Burns, et al.

So, What's Your Proposal?: Shifting High-Conflict People from Blaming to Problem-Solving in 30 Seconds! by Bill Eddy, LSCW, Esq.

Case Study

Kevin (42) and Delia (41) were married for five years before their marriage ended. Kevin had been previously married, and had fathered three children with his former wife. During his marriage to Delia, the children began to identify her as their mother because she took exceptional care of them. Their biological mother disappeared almost entirely from the picture and so played little part in their lives.

Delia has no children of her own prior to the marriage, and Kevin was adamant that he did not want more children. During their marriage, this did not present a major problem. Delia simply behaved as if Kevin's children were her own. The arrangement made perfect sense at the time and so long as things were between the parents, things remained for their children.

However, things changed drastically when the couple filed for divorce. Since Delia was not the birth-mother of Kevin's children, she found herself in a precarious legal situation in terms of access. Fortunately, Kevin was a wise father, and he knew that Delia became an integral part of his children's lives and did not want to keep them from her.

This presented many problems for the parents, but they were determined to overcome them in order to have a better life for their children. That is why they decided to attend a few sessions of divorce counseling. We discussed each of their needs at length. What emerged from the conversation was a plan to keep Delia in contact with the children without both parties having to bump heads over unrelated issues. Though Kevin had some initial resentments, he realized in counseling that Delia was serious about wanting to be part of the children's lives and did not have any hidden agendas.

The divorce had not been finalized and was on going as the couple participated in counseling. I knew that a major issue was to make sure the children were OK with the concept of living in two homes. So I focused on dialogue concerning that situation at first,

and over time this allowed Kevin and Delia to open up about wider concerns about the future of the children.

With time they both recognized their mutual desire to do well by the kids, and realized that this was more important than their differences. So I suggested they make some attempts to talk with the kids about some impending changes. Just the fact that they were united in presenting these changes would be beneficial. This would reassure the children that things would be different in some ways, but that the fundamentals would remain the same; their parents would still love them unconditionally, and they would be cared for.

I then brought up the idea of co-parenting, reminding them that this term means different things to different people. What was important was that the definition of co-parenting, make sense to both of them. Both Kevin and Delia agreed on some parameters for the co-parenting process and proceeded to find ways to move forward without disrupting the lives of their children.

Within several months, they had developed an effective system for sharing the burden between them, and they were able to minimize disruption to anyone's lives. This was the optimal outcome, but it is never out of reach when one has two loving parents to deal with. These days Delia and Kevin are doing a wonderful job of raising Karen (12), Maria (14), and Robert (16). I was impressed in how much they loved their children and were committed to making positive changes to their lives