



Co-Parenting During and After Divorce

Parenting is among the hardest things one can do. It requires a focus on creating balance and well-being on a daily basis, and for adults coping with divorce, this job becomes even more challenging. Parents are re-negotiating their relationship from one that was highly intimate to one with more distance; yet, they still need to agree on how to meet their children's needs. To do that well requires that hurt feelings be put aside when necessary to support children through a divorce. Easier said than done, we know, but the following tips can be helpful as a new normal is created.



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CREATE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

A variety of support systems are critical for both parents and children to meet changing needs and to support the adjustment to a major shift in family structure. Counseling can be helpful. It creates an opportunity for children to talk about their feelings, normalize what they are experiencing, and have the presence of an impartial adult in their lives. For parents, counseling is vital. Parents often get so focused on their children that they delay acknowledging that they are processing intense loss and grief. The hurt and anger they feel can easily get filtered through their children and unintentionally place children squarely in the middle of conflict. This upheaval affects a child's feeling of safety, security, and routine, all of which are critical for healthy development.

When parents get support, they can be calmer and more collected for their children. Parents should work together to find support for themselves and identify

the people in their child's life whom they trust to be constants, e.g., close friends, neighbors, religious leaders, teachers, or coaches. A child's school can also direct parents to school counselors, mentors, or groups like K.I.D.S. (Kids in Divorce and Separation), where children can share the experience they are going through with peers from their own school community. And the power of consistency cannot be underestimated. Routine is very calming for kids. It helps them know what to expect, to have things they can depend on, and know when and where they will see particular people should they need something.

AGREE ON THE BIG THINGS

Co-parenting is greatly influenced by the reciprocal interactions of each parent. In other words, if one parent is parenting in a healthy way but the other is not, children are at greater risk for developmental problems. Co-parenting requires empathy, patience, and open communication for success—not an easy thing to achieve for couples who are managing marital issues—but it can be done. Making children's emotional health and wellness a shared goal can help create mutual respect. Parents should strive to be as consistent as possible with the major things, but give themselves wiggle room on the minor things. This will model for children that flexibility is needed when life throws a curve ball.

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PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE

Divorce is difficult and if adults are not deliberate about managing stress in a healthy way, they open themselves up to substance abuse, reckless behavior, depression, and malaise. If you are a parent going

through a divorce yourself, remember this: by keeping yourself intact, you are better able to care for your child. An important part of parenting is harnessing the ability to remain calm moment by moment, so managing your own emotional rollercoaster and anxiety is vital.



BEFORE YOU REACT, P.A.U.S.E.

When you find yourself in a stressful moment, pause. Give yourself a minute to recognize what you are feeling and realize you have control over how the next moments will play out. Joanna Curry-Sartori, one of our Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, presents widely on the topic of mindfulness and offers the P.A.U.S.E. strategy to help you stay calm and plan reactions that will be productive and not reactive.

PAUSE

Breathe. Step back. Be mindful.

AWARE

Notice your thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Accept them.

UNDERSTAND

Listen. Acknowledge the perspectives of others. Express empathy. Be responsible for your words and actions.

SEEK SOLUTIONS

Review expectations and boundaries. Be open to new ways to interact or resolve concerns.

EXPERIMENT

Agree to consider something new. Implement a realistic plan. Reflect on results.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The Bridge serves as the Youth Service Bureau for the town of West Hartford. As part of that role, we offer in-school counseling, groups, and mentoring. We also coordinate the West Hartford Community Network for Children and Families, a network of professionals who work with children and families in the area, to help us keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening with kids in town.
- We run the Family Resource Center, the West Hartford Teen Center, and Great by 8, and we coordinate the Substance Abuse Prevention Commission.
- We run many groups at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, including Kids in Divorce and Separation (K.I.D.S.), Friendship Group, Lunch Clubs, Boys Groups, Girls Groups, and a Mindful Classroom Series.
- We have three Counseling Centers located in the centers of West Hartford, Avon, and Rockville, and our therapy team includes a licensed substance abuse counselor, as well as therapists specially trained in LGBTQ identity issues for individuals and families.



STRONG RELATIONSHIPS HELP PREVENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Influential adults continue to play the most vital role in determining how young people manage the lure of substances. Talk about substance abuse issues and connect meaningfully with kids on a regular basis. Simple things such as tucking them into bed the same way every night makes them feel secure and allows them to anticipate when they will have opportunities to talk about things on their minds.