

New kid on the block: co-parent coaching

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after her divorce when she experienced a knowledge gap in how separated parents jointly manage the upbringing of their children.

The breakdown of a relationship is not a pleasant place to be and a poorly managed relationship breakdown can have devastating consequences for both the adults and children involved that can last for decades – a point made by Sir Paul Coleridge, former High Court Judge, when commenting to *The Times* recently. As Lady Butler-Sloss, (former President of the Family Division) speaking about *Finding Fault*, the 2017 report from the Nuffield Foundation, observed:

‘If the parents have a corrosive end to the marriage, they are quite unable sometimes to recognise that a child loves both parents. What children want is for parents to part amicably so [they] can have a life with both parents.’

The tug of war for possessions, rights and children that can accompany a separation impact all parties. Mediation is crucial for this process, but it doesn’t go far enough to safeguard children. It is becoming more and more apparent that another tool is necessary to ensure that safeguarding children is paramount in cases of marital and relationship break-ups. That tool is co-parent coaching. The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 state clearly that a child has the right to know and be cared for by both parents. Where children are separated from

one or both of their parents they have the right to contact with the parent they are separated from, unless this is not in the best interests of the child.

Learning to co-parent after a separation is extremely challenging for many adults, but it is one of the best ways of trying to attain the rights laid out in the Children Acts, where children can be positively cared for by both parents. Co-parenting relationships, defined as having two fully-functioning parents who are able to put the welfare of their child at the centre of their relationship, have to transition around a full, if unusual, circle before becoming true co-parent relationships. Those stages are loving (the original relationship), broken (the obvious breakdown of the relationship), transactional (moving out of pain or dysfunction and into transactional and business like arrangements, and finally ally (where the co-parents work together, despite being apart, to raise their child). It is these last two stages that bring us closer to the essential aims of the Children Acts.

The Children Acts assume that being cared for by both parents is usually the preferred state, but if parents cannot establish a positive co-parent relationship the likelihood of psychological and emotional damage to the child is significantly increased. Being cared for by both parents is an important starting point, but it’s not the full story, and significant damage can be – and is – caused to children by unskilled and unwise parenting from one or both separated parents.

Mediation has a vital role to play in the early stages of separation, bringing experts in conflict resolution to the divorce table to help couples untangle their time together as amicably as possible. Mediation is an important step for many divorcing couples. Being given the space to talk and listen respectfully in an uninterrupted way is

crucial. Divvying up the family fortunes is made more bearable. But whilst mediation is extremely useful in many areas of divorce, it feels as though it is only a first step in helping separating parents deal with the on-going issue of how to parent their children responsibly.

Co-parent coaching is, therefore, the much needed sister skill to mediation. The tools that co-parent coaching provide to parents to help manage their children's emotional wellbeing will have the biggest impact on the family unit. Working with either one or both parents to develop their understanding of themselves, their emotions, their needs and their children's needs as well as their understanding of the continuous impact their words and actions have on their children is fundamental to raising kids who are robust, emotionally sound, and who can grow into their full potential. It is only by creating a safe unbroken parental bubble that a child can develop in this way.

A recent article in *Psychology Today*, 'Why a child's social-emotional skills are so important' emphasises that when a child's social-emotional skills are properly developed, they will be better equipped to make both simple and complex decisions, have functional relationships, as well as growing into the essential skills of self-awareness and self-management. The article by Julia Ogg, Katelynn Gohr and Kayla LaRosa, supports the theory that these skills can only be properly embodied if children's parental role models are functioning and sound. Emotional role models, positive discipline, and giving choices are all powerful tools for helping children grow up in a conscious and emotionally healthy way.

In my experience as a co-parent coach, and indeed as a co-parent myself, bringing up your children together with an ex-partner whilst the partnership is breaking down is a difficult and complex task. It's hard to achieve the 'safe unbroken parental bubble' when you are fighting with your co-parent. A brief article in the *Guardian* concludes 'the evidence suggests that kids whose parents have or are about to split up need

more support than we realise' ('Divorce continues to take a psychological toll on kids', 31 July 2016). The premise is certainly true. It is further supported by a study carried out by the University of London (*Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Wellbeing: Evidence Review* by Mooney, Oliver and Smith (2016)) that concludes that it's the extent to which children are prepared by those who are caring for them that dictates how well they cope with the experience of change:

'It is a feature of today's society that many children will experience family breakdown and that family structure will continue to be diverse. Policies which focus on supporting maternal mental health, facilitating cooperative parenting between parents, and communication between parents and their children, reducing and managing parental conflict, encouraging good parent-child relationships, and strategies for reducing financial hardship are just some of the areas that may help to maximise positive child outcomes following parental separation.'

The report shows that it is not the breakdown of the marriage, but rather how the people in the marriage respond to the resulting conflict and its impact on their children that is crucial to safeguarding the children. The report also explains that co-operative parenting, or co-parenting, is fundamental to keeping a child secure and playful. According to The Office for National Statistics, there were nearly 100,000 children whose parents divorced in 2013. In addition, there were many more whose unmarried parents separated, and who were therefore not included in the statistics.

Let me be optimistic and assume that of those 100,000 children, 50,000 of them now live in homes where the ex-marital communication is intact, and good quality co-parenting can be assumed. However, on this basis another 50,000 children per year therefore come from homes where strong co-parenting is not a reality. Multiplied over a 20-year time span this produces a total of 1 million children and young adults who

have been negatively affected by parents not working successfully together to raise them. That's nearly 1/50th of the population, and that's a conservative estimate that doesn't even include the children of unmarried parents who have separated. So let me turn it on its head. What if it is possible to keep parenting intact even when the loving relationship breaks down? What if throughout the whole of the child's life, he or she can safely move between homes, lives and growing extended families happily, without fear and with the minimum need to compartmentalize. How could that impact on society? I would strongly suggest it would be enormously beneficial.

What is co-parent coaching?

The approach I use is split into three phases:

- 1) Getting things straight
- 2) Continuous parenting and negotiation
- 3) Looking forward

It is important to break the approach down into these three steps. By doing so I: a) manage the emotion; b) move into a transactional relationship; and c) move into functioning co-parenting. All these steps increase the parenting skills and negotiation skills and benefit the child.

The first phase – 'Getting things straight' – focuses on goal setting, creating a calm and structured space and ensuring the parent is unbroken so they are not in 'child' mode when they are negotiating with their co-parent. It focusses on putting aside the emotion and increasing and building up the transactional capability of the parent or parents and is essential in order to make strong progress in co-parenting. It is not easy to co-parent from a broken place. During the first phase I also look at how we pass information to children, what the world looks like from their point of view, and what it's like for them to live in two homes and accept new people and siblings into their lives. I also work with parents on how to accept new partners and children in their ex-spouse's life, too. A united parenting front is a muscle that needs using and that needs to go through many different

challenges and thresholds in order to be strong and effective. Co-parenting coaching uses tools that help to develop this muscle, whilst at the same time giving parents the chance to live their lives with fullness, resonance and strength.

Phase two, 'Continuous parenting and negotiation', looks at how to increase negotiation skills, form structures and routines, and help to maintain a strong transactional relationship. We put down private markers in the sand with our clients to help them identify where they will compromise with their co-parent and where they won't, all the while keeping the effect on their child front and centre of their mind

Negotiation is often a difficult skill to master at the best of times. In loving and healthy relationships, give and take is used instead of negotiation. But outside of a functioning partnership, a natural stance is to look out for yourself and your immediate dependents. It can feel unnatural and difficult to offer something important to an ex-partner who you don't care about, especially if that something is access to your child. However, if we place the needs of the child at the centre, and recognise that all negotiations impact on the long term health and wellbeing of that child, our negotiating position looks very different.

In addition, we use tools that enable co-parents to remain calm and manage in-the-moment situations. Tools include damage limitation exercises – and how to deal with the aftermath when you do, inevitably 'blow your top', what to do if the kids have witnessed it, and how to rebuild the fragile walls within which you, your co-parent, and your children all exist. Importantly we draw on many years of high level communications experience to help people navigate how to talk and listen to each other and write and respond over text and email, remembering that the written word is permanent.

Phase three, 'Looking forward', includes setting new goals from the viewpoint of the new family unit, living in harmony with your co-parent and tapping into the fun side

of parenting so your children can relax. This phase also looks long term at the difficult issues that may crop up – problems with your child or teen, how to navigate schooling and discuss best solutions with your co-parent. Most importantly it puts structures around how often you meet your co-parent, with or without your children.

Case study*

Nicola and Pete had been together for over a decade. They had been married for five years and had a three-year-old child. Pete met another woman and left the marital home. Nicola was distraught and angry and very emotional. She was surrounded by people telling her not to let Pete see the child and to withhold access as punishment for what he had done. But Nicola sensed this course of action would be damaging to her child long term. Nicola worked with Rolling Stone Coaching (www.rollingstonecoaching.com) on an individual basis because she wanted to manage her emotional response to the breakdown of the marriage in such a way that she could rebuild herself whilst simultaneously making sure her child was a vital part of both her and Pete's lives. Nicola understood that to achieve this she would need to relearn her relationship with Pete (reference points shift after a break up) and make it transactional and all about their child. Nicola's response to the situation and her active role in initiating the co-parenting approach surprised Pete, who found it a difficult concept to understand. He presumed that both he and Nicola would independently have an involvement in their child's upbringing, and he was expecting it to be more ad-hoc, haphazard and emotional.

Twelve months later, Nicola and Pete have systems and structures in place that help them both to protect and love their child. It is not easy at times for either parent to share their child, but they are able to do it in such a way that is meaningful and unbroken for their child. They have agreed simple structures like what clothes and toys stay at which house. They have also agreed a joint approach to more complex and

knotty events such as joint family days out, commitments from both parties not to speak ill of new partners in front of the child, and the enlistment of both Nicola and Pete's wider families to hold the space safe for the child by talking to the child and asking how the other parent is. All of this means that although the child still has to pass between lives and between homes, they are doing it in a supportive and non-threatening environment.

Nicola says:

'Co-parent coaching changed my whole approach to my separation from my husband. It showed me how I could put my child first, but whilst making sure I was ok. It gave me the skills to respond to my ex in a way that meant we could all move forward, rather than be stuck in a negative emotional rut and this has made our child's experience of our divorce a better one. Co-parent coaching should be offered to all divorcing couples who have kids. It's a no-brainer.'

* all names have been changed

Conclusion

Coaching is many things but, in essence, it is about uncovering the whole person so they are able to make conscious choices, live resonantly, and live according to their values. Coaching helps people shift from a 'stuck' place to a place that is alive and relevant. Co-parent coaching allows people to move on following a traumatic separation and can work with either one or both parts of the separated couple. Co-parent coaching reminds separated parents that they are naturally creative, resourceful and whole – and this knowledge will immediately impact their relationship with their children.

Successful co-parenting means that choices for the children can be made with the children front and centre of the decision. And that's the bottom line of co-parenting: that children are put first and that all parties in the arrangement – parents, grandparents, new partners, step grand-parents et al – all work together.