

A child is for life, not just for marriage



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Parents must take proactive steps to protect their children during their separation and beyond. The concept of co-parenting, and the coaching that goes with it, can help parents ensure their children get through the process as gently as possible

When two people decide to have children, it is a responsibility that stays with them for the rest of their lives, not just the rest of their relationship. This may seem self-evident as an intention, but when unravelling several years of relationship, where money, home, assets and children are involved, it can sometimes get lost amid the stresses and practicalities of separation. When a marriage or relationship breaks down, whether it is a mutual decision or an acrimonious ending, both parents are invariably caught up in some level of emotion. Untangling the spaghetti of a joint life is far from straightforward. When emotions run high it is hard for parents to remain fully focused and present on their children. As a result, children are often left feeling unsafe and unstable.

As we move towards no-fault divorce, we would overlook at our peril the fact that it will remain a highly disruptive experience for children. Despite smoother legal divorce proceedings, parents will still need to actively keep their children robust, safe, playful and whole during the process. Even though a no-fault divorce may not be angry and bitter, the result for the children is still enormous. Their parents will no longer live together. They will have to adapt to two separate homes, with different rules and ways of doing things in each; they will have to move between those homes, get used to different people, perhaps even new siblings. These are very significant changes for children. Even if everybody is outwardly smiling, inside, children of relationship breakdown are often not – and will not unless parents take active measures to keep them secure.

So what can parents do to help keep their children as safe and protected as possible during relationship breakdown? We know about the value of the traditional routes of therapy, counselling, family therapy and, to a degree, mediation. But in order to mitigate any long-term effects and to successfully manage the transition from complete family to separate co-parent units there needs to be something more. Parents

need to create a safe unbroken parental “bubble” to support a child’s optimum development.

Co-parent coaching is a unique system devised to help achieve this ultimate objective. It has been under development since 2009, and successfully tried and tested on a significant number of individuals and couples going through divorce and relationship breakdown. The aim is to achieve the one thing that all parents want following a separation: happy and whole children. It works with families who are going through both acrimonious and no-fault separations. “The co-parent way” has its foundations in ten years of research into, thinking about, and practical lived experience of co-parenting. It is a combination of very practical advice for co-parenting, and certified coaching techniques that enable parents to stand side by side to bring up their children even though they are no longer in a loving relationship.

The unique approach of the co-parent way makes it possible to work with either one or both parents through the process. At Rolling Stone Coaching we work with many parents who have been excluded from their children. Skilful coaching helps the alienated parent initially deal with their exclusion and then look at ways to be present for their children even when they may not have access to them.

Co-parent coaching provides tools to parents to help manage their children’s emotional wellbeing. This has a major impact on the wider family unit. Working with either one or both parents we develop their understanding of themselves, their emotions, their needs and their children’s needs. They grow to understand the continuous impact their words and actions have on their children. Through the coaching approach, parents come to understand that managing that impact is fundamental to raising kids who can grow into their full potential, and who are robust and emotionally sound.

By splitting co-parent coaching into three phases, we are able first to manage the emotion, secondly, move into a

transactional relationship and thirdly, create a path towards functional co-parenting. Each of these steps fosters crucial parenting and negotiation skills and allows parents to communicate more effectively with each other and with their child. The three phases are:

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

The first phase 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 focuses 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 we 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.

Phase two – continuous parenting and negotiation – looks at how to increase negotiation skills, form structures and routines, and maintain a strong transactional relationship. We help our clients to put down private markers to help them identify where they will compromise with their co-parent and where they won’t, all the while keeping their child front and centre of their mind. We look at navigating “hot times” such as Christmas and birthdays, and how parents can remain adults around their kids and their co-parent, even when they just want to react emotionally.

Tools in phase two include damage limitation exercises – and how to deal with the aftermath when co-parents do, inevitably “blow their top”, what to do if the kids have witnessed it, and how to rebuild the fragile walls within which co-parents and children all exist. Importantly, we draw on many years of communications experience to help clients navigate how to talk and listen to each other, and write and respond over text and email, remembering that the written word is permanent and easily misunderstood.

Phase three – looking forward – includes setting new goals from the viewpoint of the new family unit, living in harmony with a co-parent and tapping into the fun side of parenting so children can relax. This phase also looks long term at the difficult issues that may crop up – problems with children or teens – and how to navigate schooling and discuss best solutions with a co-parent. Most importantly it puts structures around how often co-parents meet, with or without children present. It tackles difficult hurdles, such as what to do when parents are not getting on, blended families and beyond.

Successful co-parenting means that choices for the children are 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-grandparents *et al* – all work with the same messages, the same goals and the same boundaries for the benefit of the child. If we can make our co-parent our ally, then we create a safer bubble in which our children can grow and flourish.

As divorce moves towards – it is hoped – greater amicability, we need to remember that as adults we have the tools to deal with complexity and nuance in a way that children do not. “Amicable” divorces will still be hard for children. Parents must take proactive steps to protect their children during their separation and beyond. And as a collective sector we must point parents towards tools that help them do that. Co-parent coaching is very definitely one of those tools.

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Since November, Marcie has been working closely with Cafcass to organise an international co-parenting conference in London in March, where she will be a keynote speaker.

The conference is designed to take a first step towards setting international best practice standard for co-parenting. Amongst other things, the conference will look at the evolving landscape of no-fault divorce, and its impact on children. The conference aims to establish guidance and recommendations for providers of support services for children of separated parents.

Digital Parenting Plan

Resolution’s Parenting after Parting and Children committees have both worked to create an interactive, digital parenting plan which you can use with clients to set out child arrangements.

Free and exclusive to members, the service can be accessed via my.resolution.org.uk

