

# Parallel Parenting

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In spite of their differences, many divorced parents are able to raise their children together in a relatively friendly and flexible manner. Others, though they may disagree, can put aside their differences at least in front of the children and maintain a respectful, business like relationship.

A few cannot let go of the fight.

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Ongoing parental conflict is one of the most damaging things parents can do to their children. It splits children in two. They often feel they must choose between one parent and the other. They are tossed in the storm with their parental anchors unable to provide

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firm footing. Over time, most parents are able to let go of the hurt and anger of divorce and move on with

their lives in a productive manner. Others carry on, in round after destructive round. Parents who truly cannot cooperate in raising their children, might consider parallel parenting.

The term comes from child development theory. Very young children, who have not yet learned to play cooperatively, will play next to each other, engaged with their own toys, without any real interaction. Some parents would do well to emulate them, raising their children while leaving each other alone.

Of course it is far better for children to see their parents working together, but if that is not possible, at least one parent needs to disengage from the conflict and provide a more peaceful home.

This is a do list for such parents:

It is better for children to see their parents working together, but if that is not possible, at least one parent needs to disengage.

\* Avoid seeing each other and write a parenting plan that minimizes contact. Arrange fewer exchanges with longer time in each parent's home. When children go from Mom's house to Dad's, meet in a neutral location with only one parent present. Mom can drop the children off at school and Dad can pick them up after. Or have a friend or relative provide transportation.

\* Avoid conversation except in emergencies. Texting works for some parents, email for others. Some send messages through a trusted friend or relative, however, never use the children as messengers. Passing a notebook back and forth with young children can be an effective way to communicate.

\* Parents do not criticize each other's parenting style. If Dad serves jellybeans for breakfast, Mom can provide more nutritious fare without comment. If Mom sends them to school in rags, Dad can provide more appropriate clothing. While it is ideal for both households to have similar customs

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and standards of behavior, with parallel parenting, that is not possible. If the children protest that Dad always does this, or Mom never does that, say, "this is the way we do things in this household." Or "you need to discuss that with your other parent." End of discussion. They will adjust.

\* Educate the children about any safety concerns you have about the other parent's home.

\* Before engaging with the other parent, ask yourself, "is this an emergency?" and "what difference will this make in 20 years?" If it really does matter, don't go it alone--ask a minister, friend or mediator to facilitate a necessary discussion. Try to tell your co-parent what s/he needs to know in a way s/he can hear. Avoid editorializing.

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\* Follow the parenting plan to the letter. Parents who get along have the luxury of flexibility. You don't.

\* Put all agreements in writing.

\* Give your children permission to love both of you. Please don't put down your co-parent in front of them. They will learn his or her faults soon enough without your trash talking. When you need to unload, save the gripe session for your friends. An idea borrowed from UpToParents.com is to tell your children positive

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memories you have about their other parent. This costs

you nothing and allows them to value the part of themselves that comes from their other parent.

Elaine Wilson, a parenting specialist from Oklahoma, writes in *Parallel Parenting Stops the Bleeding*, that this arrangement assumes that both parents are capable of safe parenting. Parents without an attachment to the children; lacking in parenting skills; living with severe mental illness; who are physically,

psychologically or sexually abusive; or addicted to drugs or alcohol; should not be trusted to parent unsupervised.

A period of successful parallel parenting, can give both parents breathing room to relax, disengage

and be ready for more positive interchanges in the future. It only takes one parent to change the cycle of conflict. One parent can change the dynamics. That parent can be you.

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That parent can be you.**

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