

S-H-A-R-E

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A guide to co-parenting during, and after, a collaborative divorce process.

Turning Shame into S-H-A-R-E

The sadness we feel for our children as we prepare to separate is grounded in reality; research is clear that divorce can have a negative emotional effect on children, in both the short and long term. While this is devastating, the research is also clear that divorce in itself is not the only factor that predicts negative emotional effects, especially in the long term; denial of parental relationship, decreased resources for caregiving parents; negative emotion observed in parental interactions and in parental response to divorce are all the factors that are most intricately connected to the effects of divorce on children. Put another way, it isn't that you divorce, it's HOW you divorce, and how you remain connected as parents, that has the biggest impact on children's adjustment post-divorce. When emotions are swirling it helps to have a little cheat sheet that we can use to ground ourselves and guide our choices around important, but difficult, matters. I learned of an acronym for parents that I find particularly useful in my work with clients: SHARE. Keeping this simple word in mind can help you know what matters, and where you need to communicate openly, when it comes to co-parenting.

School

It may seem completely obvious that keeping each other informed about school is the first area of necessary communication. Yet consider this; most couples have a divide and conquer approach to managing their children's lives BEFORE the divorce process even begins. It is very easy for the parent that was always 'plugged-in' to their children's schooling to remain plugged-in, but with acrimony and tension between the parents the information flow that once allowed the other parent access to information and a sense of participation quickly fades. And while it might feel great to know that you are the "involved" parent, commitment to the collaborative process requires us to let go of self-righteousness in the service of more important goals, like our children's well being and adjustment. So what areas of school are important to share consistently, and how can this be facilitated without tension and acrimony? This isn't your grandma's divorce; meaning that the issues she may have faced and the resources available to her are entirely different from what you have available. First, children with a sense of connection to school are protected from all sorts of health and behavior risks. Knowledge of how they are adjusting in the new school year, who their peer group is, what subject areas are of interest or challenge, which teacher's they get on well with and which one's are having conflict are important to know about and share. If a weekly chat about these matters is not possible, than creating a shared online document (not your facebook page!) can facilitate information updates without requiring regular voice contact. A word of caution, while both parents will have to work hard to get access and share it with their partner, do not use your children as messengers. If there is a reminder, a meeting, or a question that is not really about your child, don't have them serve as town crier. You can work with your collaborative team to find a solution if getting information is more challenging than you feel it should be.

Health

Both parents should have information about any health changes that are occurring in their children. And while being informed is important, it is often very helpful for one parent to have final decision making authority for medical decisions. If a child should need psychotherapy to address adjustment difficulties it is good if both parents can participate, but if parents are having difficulty agreeing on a therapist or a provider it won't help their child adjust any faster to argue endlessly before seeking services.

Assignments

Yes, I already mentioned school above, but assignments are a special mention. Assignments are the tasks that contribute to and measure learning, and they are often the slippery banana when it comes to co-parenting and reluctant children. If parents do not establish a system that allows each of them to know, and by extension assist and hold accountable, their children's assignments there is an increased chance that their children will fall behind. Academic achievement is impacted by accountability so this is a major area where shared communication is essential.

Recreation

Children's friendships are often formed based on their activities, and children who do not feel engaged and connected to others often have a hard time coping with separating parents. You and your co-parent can benefit from sharing decision making and information about the activities your child is involved with, interested in, or turning away from. And while "recreation" is all about fun, be warned this area is sometimes the most challenging! This is often a "hot-button" area, as it comes with financial, time, and value-based implications as parents attempt to put their children's interests and needs first while balancing those with their own needs and beliefs. Recognizing this can make disagreements that are likely to surface less of a surprise, and can help both parents develop understanding for their partner's position.

Expenses

The collaborative process requires open and accurate financial disclosure between parties in order to be successful. Finances will be a frequent focus area while communicating with attorneys and each other. Even so, we can sometimes lose sight of the costs associated with our children's care and interests. While college calculations are sure to be a topic, so too should the mundane expenditures that are part of the parenting register; school fundraisers, extracurriculars, visits to extended family. Getting clarity about these, and being on the same page with our co-parent, can make identifying expenses more accurate and more consistent with what we most want in our collaborative law process.

If you have spent any time with a three year old, you already know that sharing is not always, or ever, easy. What often helps a toddler learn to share is keeping them focused on the things that matter more than the item they are hoarding. We can do well when we keep this in mind for ourselves. Harmony pays far greater dividends in the parenting relationship than pride and bitterness will.

Additional Reading:

Feinberg, M. E. (2003). The internal structure and ecological context of coparenting: A framework for research and intervention. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 3(2), 95-131.

Gamache, S. (2004). Collaborative practice: A new opportunity to address children's best interest in divorce. *La. L. Rev.*, 65, 1455.

Singer, J. B. (2009). For The Sake of The Children: Collaborations Between Law and Social Science to Advance The Field of family Dispute Resolution: DISPUTE RESOLUTION AND THE POSTDIVORCE FAMILY: IMPLICATIONS OF A PARADIGM SHIFT 1. *Fam. Ct. Rev.*, 47, 363-715.