

HUMAN RELATIONS

Parenting: Success Requires A Team Effort

Elizabeth Sharp, Graduate Student, Human Development and Family Studies
Sara Gable, State Specialist, Human Development and Family Studies

Every day, parents are faced with decisions about how to raise their children. Some decisions are minor, such as whether children can have snacks before dinner, and some are major, such as which school a child attends. Sometimes mothers and fathers agree on these matters, and other times they do not. How parents negotiate their childrearing beliefs and their day-to-day shared parenting responsibilities is called coparenting.

Coparents may live in the same household or in separate households. Regardless of where coparents live, and whether coparents are married or not, research suggests that the coparenting relationship plays an important role in children's lives. The extent to which children experience their parents as partners or opponents in parenting is related to children's adjustment and well being.

The study of coparenting grew out of research done on marriage, parenting and child development. In general, studies showed that children who were getting along with others, doing well in school and feeling good about themselves lived in families with satisfied husbands and wives and effective mothers and fathers. Children who were not doing as well lived in households with less satisfied spouses and



less effective parents. A closer look at these families revealed that husbands and wives who were not getting along often allowed their marital problems to interfere with their effectiveness as a parenting team.

Unhappy marriages and unsupportive coparenting went hand-in-hand. And unsupportive coparenting resulted in children who didn't feel good about themselves or get along well with others. Research shows these connections between marriage, coparenting and child development in both divorced and non-divorced families.

Supportive coparenting

Supportive coparenting takes place when mothers and fathers agree on parenting decisions. These decisions range from the routine, such as agreeing that bedtime is 8 p.m., to the philosophical, such as beliefs about what is best for the child.

Children experience supportive coparenting when they receive the same message from both parents and when they observe their parents supporting each other's parenting efforts.

You can find opportunities to practice supportive coparenting every day. For example:

Adam (2 years old) touches the dishes in the dishwasher. Mom and Dad quickly tell Adam, "No, no, stay away from the dishwasher."

In this example, Adam receives the same message from both parents. He is told that he should stay away from the dishwasher. When children hear the same message from both parents, they are more likely to listen and cooperate.

Bob (18 months old) stands by the door, waiting to go outside. Mom tells Bob that he can't go out because he isn't wearing his outside clothes. Bob then looks at his dad. Dad replies to Bob, "You heard what your mother said."

In this situation, the child receives

the same message from both parents.

Parents who do not live in the same household also have many opportunities to support each other's parenting decisions. For example:

Marcia (13 years old) lied to her mother about a test grade. Because of the lie, Marcia's mom told her that she could not see her friends over the weekend. However, Marcia was to spend the weekend at her dad's house. After hearing about the lying incident, Marcia's father agreed that she shouldn't see her friends over the weekend.

Because Marcia's parents agreed that the lie was serious and required follow-through, she received the same message from both parents.

Supportive coparenting is important for a child's well-being. Children can feel better about themselves when they do not have to worry about their parents. Children need to experience a strong and cooperative relationship between their parents. Research shows that children do best when the adults "in charge" can get along with each other and handle disagreements positively. Mothers and fathers who agree about most parenting issues and who frequently support each others' parenting efforts create an environment that allows children to be children. In this way, children have the opportunity to focus on what matters to them (school, friends, activities), not their parents' disagreements.

Unsupportive coparenting

Unsupportive coparenting occurs when mothers and fathers disagree about parenting issues. These can be minor disagreements, such as one parent letting a child watch TV before she does her homework and the other parent wanting the child to do her homework first. These issues can also be about childrearing beliefs. Some parents may argue about how to discipline,

with one parent believing in physical punishment and the other believing in reasoning and discussion. These arguments can become negative and hostile if parents are unable to resolve their differences.

Children experience unsupportive coparenting when they hear different messages from their parents and when they observe their parents arguing about issues related to them. For example:

Tashel (9 years old) comes into the kitchen to ask her parents if she can play with her friend. Immediately, Mom says, "Okay, have fun!" But Dad tells Tashel to stay home and finish cleaning her room.

In this example, Tashel receives different messages from her parents. Her mom tells her that she can go play with her friend and her dad tells her to stay home and clean her room. What should she do? Who should she listen to?

This is a confusing situation that can cause a child to feel guilty (for having to choose which parent to listen to), anxious (for worrying about their parents fighting), and caught in the middle of a no-win situation.

Repeated experiences of unsupportive coparenting can be harmful for children. Research tells us that children who see and hear coparenting disagreements feel bad about themselves and experience guilt, stress and anxiety. Poor coparenting relationships weaken the partnership between husbands and wives, and may cause children to worry about their parents' relationship. Parental disagreements and arguments about childrearing create a no-win situation for children. They don't know which parent to listen to, are unsure of how to behave, and feel responsible for their mother's and father's problems.

Children are especially affected by

— Continued on page 4

Coparenting after divorce

A group of researchers at the University of Missouri asked children about their parents' post-divorce relationships. According to these children, being put "in the middle" of their coparents' disagreements is distressing. Here are some examples of what the children said:

(Girl, age 14) "I get stuck in the middle a lot: 'What's your dad doing,' 'What's your mom doing?' It kind of gets annoying 'cause then I get to a point where it's like 'if you really want to know, ask them yourself.'"

(Boy, age 10) "I don't like being the messenger between parents. I mean they'll tell me something, like my mom will say, 'Oh, what's your dad doing,' or 'Oh, by the way, could you tell him this and that for me,' and it just goes back and forth for a while until I quit doing that. I just didn't want to do that anymore."

Keeping children out of the middle of post-divorce coparenting conversations is important for a child's well-being. Children need to be free from the responsibility of delivering messages and information between their parents. They also need to have the opportunity to focus on what is important to them.

Special thanks:

The authors want to thank Jason Hans and Mark Fine for sharing these quotes and others that appear in the text. This research was supported by the University of Missouri's McNair Scholars Program.

Keys to Conflict Resolution

Handling difficult situations is a part of everyday life. Sometimes, when we try to handle a disagreement or ask someone to change his or her behavior, a conflict erupts. How we handle and manage conflicts is important for our well-being and for our relationships.

Conflicts about coparenting can be a disadvantage to children as well as to the marital relationship. One of the keys to successful conflict management is RESOLUTION. When parents resolve their conflicts, children learn about handling disagreements. This gives children confidence in their parents' ability to take care of matters and move forward.

Behaviors that help conflict resolution:

■ Clear, nondefensive communication

Use "I" statements when you begin to talk about your thoughts and feelings. Begin your sentences with "I" (such as, "I feel," "I think," "I was hurt") instead of "You" (such as, "You make me mad," "You didn't do this"). When you use "I" statements instead of "You" statements, the person you are talking with will be less likely to feel defensive.

■ Patient listening

Really listen while the other person is talking. Focus on what the other person is saying instead of thinking about what you are going to say next. Wait until the person is finished talking before you respond to what was said.

■ Understanding and mutual respect

Work to see the other person's perspective. Think about his or her point of view and what he or she is saying. Recognize that one person's opinion is not better than another's.

■ Stay calm

Do your best to stay calm when you are working through a disagreement. Breathe slowly, silently count or pinch your thumb and forefinger together to keep from becoming upset or angry. If you or your partner become upset, stop talking and agree to continue when you have both calmed down.

■ Maintain focus

Focus on the topic under discussion and work toward resolution of that issue. Keep unrelated issues out of the discussion.

Behaviors that hurt conflict resolution:

■ Criticism.

Avoid criticizing the other person and finding fault with his or her thoughts and ideas. This strategy makes a person feel hopelessly flawed. Instead, focus on what you would like to see changed. For example, saying "you're a slob" is an attack on the other person whereas, "I would like you to pick up your clothes," focuses on the actual behavior.

■ Defensiveness

It can be easy to respond to another person's complaints or suggestions for change with defensiveness (such as, "It's not my fault"). Resist the urge to hear what is said as a personal attack. Instead, listen to your partner's words as helpful information and ideas. Keep your response non-emotional and view the exchange of information as intended to help, not to make someone feel bad.

■ Sarcasm

Sarcasm is especially damaging because it is often intended to hurt another person. If you find yourself thinking lots of negative thoughts about someone and imagine yourself saying these things, stop these thought patterns and replace them with more compassionate ideas.

■ Passiveness

Withdrawing from the disagreement does not resolve the situation. Some people feel physically uncomfortable and tense with difficult conversations. Instead of responding to the physical discomfort, try to focus on the issue at hand and the words being said. If the conflict is too uncomfortable, you can say, "I can't deal calmly with this right now. Let's agree to talk about it in an hour, after I've calmed down and had time to think."

Two possible roads to resolution

■ Consider each other's ideas and make a decision. This road involves negotiation and compromise. Although each person may give up something, the solution is agreeable to both.

■ Let one person make the decision for both of you, even if you are not in total agreement with the outcome. "Agree to disagree," and move forward

Conflict is natural. Conflicts are best resolved when parents are able to negotiate, apologize, let go of the disagreement and move ahead. Research says that even if parents resolve the disagreement "behind closed doors," children are less likely to get upset and more likely to feel better. When children experience coparenting conflicts that are unresolved, they feel angry and distressed. Every step toward conflict resolution is a move in the right direction.

unsupportive coparenting that includes negative emotions. When one parent expresses sarcasm or disapproval of the other parent, children feel the "sting" of these exchanges.

One 13-year-old boy, whose parents are divorced, said this about his parents' fighting: "They (his parents) have fought because they want me the same week or something — it's not working. My dad has gotten really angry at mom and, yeah, when your parents fight, you don't feel good at all because you feel like you had something to do with it and they're fighting over you."

The reality of coparenting

Day-to-day, most mothers and fathers engage in both supportive and unsupportive coparenting. Parents commonly agree about some parenting matters and disagree about others. However, research shows that the best situation for children is when parents engage in more supportive coparenting than unsupportive coparenting. Children do better when their mothers and fathers work together as a parenting team and support one another's efforts.

Research shows that children's adjustment can be helped or hindered by the quality of marriage and coparenting relationships. When mothers and fathers, whether married or not, work to keep the coparenting relationship strong and supportive, children benefit.

Because of the importance of supportive coparenting, mothers and fathers should cooperate. Cooperation requires parents to make a conscious effort to put their child's best interest first. Parents need to consider their child's thoughts and feelings when coparenting and learn to "see the world through their child's eyes." Mothers and fathers can be supportive of each other's parenting and demonstrate mutual courtesy and respect.

When coparenting disagreements arise, parents can work toward resolving the issue. Conflict resolution is critical in learning how to manage disagreements. When parents resolve their disagreements, children feel confident that their parents can work together.

When asked if good communication between parents makes it easier for kids, one teenage boy replied, "Yeah, 'cause then if your parents get mad, then they can get mad at each other and then that makes it a lot easier on a kid because it's not really the kid's fault..."

Children recognize supportive coparenting and everyone benefits from it.

References

Cummings, E. M., Ballard, M., El-Sheikh, M., and Lake, M. 1991. Resolution and children's responses to interadult anger. *Developmental Psy-*

chology, 27, 462-470.

Cummings, E. M., and Davies, P. 1994. *Children and marital conflict*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Emery, R. E. 1982. Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce. *Psychological Bulletin*, 92, 310-330.

Fiske, C., and Clark, J. 1996. *Negotiation Skills*. University of Missouri, Outreach and Extension, Human Environmental Sciences publication (GH 6830).

Gable, S., Belsky, J., and Crnic, K. 1995. Coparenting during the child's 2nd year: A descriptive account. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 609-616.

Gable, S., Crnic, K., and Belsky, J. 1994. Coparenting within the family system: Influences on children's development. *Family Relations*, 43, 380-386.

Gottman, J. M., Coan, J., Carrere, S., and Swanson, C. 1998. Predicting marital happiness and stability from newlywed interactions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60, 5-22.

Gottman, J. and DeClaire, J. 1997. *The heart of parenting: How to raise an emotionally intelligent child*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Editorial assistant: Casie Presley, Agricultural Journalism student.



■ Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Ronald J. Turner, Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri and Lincoln University, Columbia, MO 65211. ■ University Outreach and Extension does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability or status as a Vietnam era veteran in employment or programs. ■ If you have special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act and need this publication in an alternative format, write ADA Officer, Extension and Agricultural Information, 1-98 Agriculture Building, Columbia, MO 65211, or call (573) 882-7216. Reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate your special needs.