

Create a successful parenting plan for children after divorce

'The Co-Parenting Survival Guide' advises parents on how to let go of conflict and do what's best for the kids. Read an excerpt

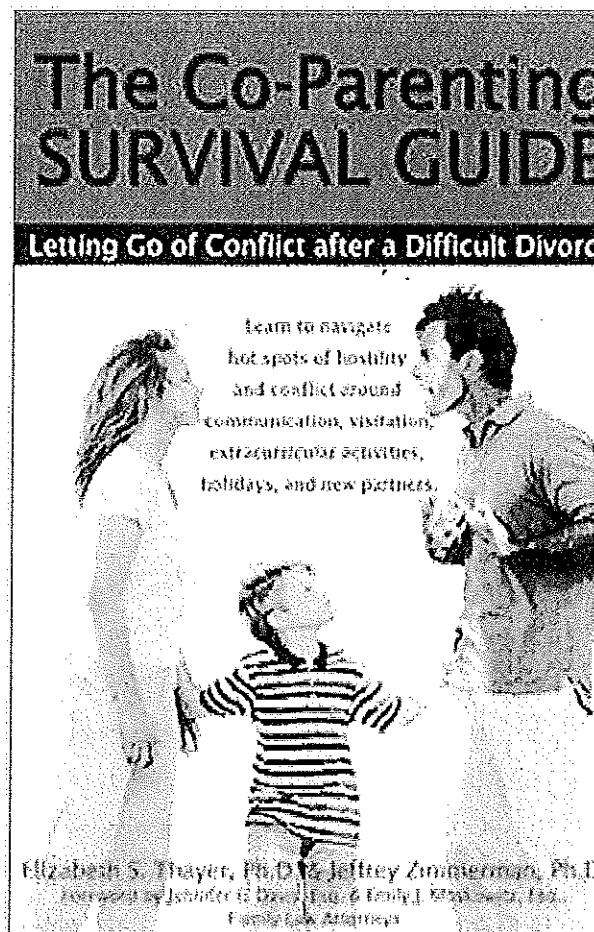
TODAY

updated 4/13/2005 11:43:25 AM ET

Parents face unique challenges after divorce. In "The Co-Parenting Survival Guide," psychologists Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman set out rules for parents to calm the emotions and ease the stress of shared parenting. Read an excerpt below.

A dozen golden parent agreement rules

Most of the literature on co-parenting discusses sets of rules (Blau, 1993; Ricci, 1980) to follow when interacting with the other parent or when dealing with the children. These rules are designed to provide a structure for your interactions and to prevent conflict. They are crucial, simple fundamentals that need to be adhered to at all times to prevent hurting the children. Their simplicity makes them easy to accept, and few parents ever say that they don't want to follow them. They would find it hard to argue that the rules aren't in their children's best interests. However, the dynamics of high-conflict relationships are such that the rules are easily broken. It is a good idea to keep these rules close at hand so that you can refer to them whenever fighting impulses arise. Melinda Blau's book (1996) provides daily meditations for parents that can keep you focused on the behaviors that will enhance co-parenting relationships. Do whatever is necessary to make sure that the children's needs are treated with the respect that they are due. You wouldn't talk to a colleague or client in ways that would inflame them, nor would you interfere with their work or their relationships with shared



personnel. You would work with them and figure out how to get the results you want and need. You need to treat your co-parent the same way.

The following are our recommendations for rules of conduct as co-parents. These rules should be reviewed and formally signed by both parents.

We will treat each other with respect at all times

The key to this parenting rule is cordiality. Parents must interact with each other in ways that demonstrate the fundamentals of acceptable social interaction. This means greeting each other nicely and exchanging pleasantries in front of the children. Both parents need to routinely act in a manner that models appropriate behavior between two adults. Remember that your children will treat you and the other parent in the same way that you treat one another. In addition, you are providing them with an example of how to approach other adults in their lives in school, athletics, work, etc. Common decency is the only acceptable principle to follow when working with or talking with the other parent. Anything less than that can be harmful to your children's welfare and will contribute to a pattern of conflict, which will have a negative emotional impact on their future relationships with you and others in their lives.

We will not use condescending or derogatory terms in exchanges with each other

This too is a very simple rule! Do not speak to each other in inflammatory ways. High-conflict parents often feel free to say insulting, attacking things to one another that they would never say to anyone else in their lives.

They use language that is not acceptable in any other areas of their lives. They feel free to call the other parent names, use slang, use four-letter words, and heap criticism upon the other parent. These are just more attempts to spray anger and to control the other parent. Every time that a parent hurls a hurtful remark at the other parent, every time a parent refers to the other parent in a derogatory manner, and every time a parent peppers their exchange with expletives, they need to remember how much they are affecting their children's futures. Keep your children's faces in front of you at all times (pull out their pictures if needed) and STOP before you say things that contribute to a level of conflict that will become harder and harder to repair.

We agree to make our children's needs more important than our own territorial needs or needs for independence

More from TODAY.com

Operating room fires hurt hundreds each year

Timber! Fainting fiancée floored by proposal

Discuss: Could flirting boost your marriage?

Try Home Chef winner's creamy banoffee pie

Carrie Fisher gets electrotherapy 'because I'm bipolar'

Your children's lives continue during and beyond your divorce. Your lives as parents should therefore continue to be dictated (to a reasonable degree) by the children's needs and schedules. Their lives should go on in as routine a way as possible. Their activities, school requirements, and peer relationships are still important to them and their development. You have to adapt to meet their needs and to participate in their lives, a concept that is hard for parents who insist on thinking about their parenting schedule as "my time with the children." They see every party, practice, activity, and school function as an imposition. They believe that the other parent is trying to take away their time with the children, make their life complicated, and interfere with their parenting relationship. Some parents are just not used to adapting their world to work well for the children, even if that means that they may have to miss a business meeting or a social engagement. Many parents try to balance their new lives, a quest for privacy, and their need for new relationships with work, the parenting schedule, and the demands of family and friends. Children can become pawns in this process and are often used as objects through which one parent can get back at the other. Every request for a schedule change, or for help in transportation, or even for the child's participation in a new area of interest, can become a struggle and an opportunity to get back at the other parent. High-conflict parents are often heard saying, "Do not schedule the children for activities on my time" or "If Susie goes there, then I will be missing two hours of my time." This then provides justification for saying "No" to the other parent and ultimately to the child. Be sure that your decisions are truly based on your vision of the well-being of your children and your knowledge of them. Decisions should not be made out of your desire to seize control, to make life difficult for the other parent, or to hurt them with an unnecessary power play. You only hurt the children and your relationship with them.

We agree to respect the other parent's time with our children and not interfere with the scheduled agreement

High-conflict parents and their children need their parenting schedule—it provides glue and structure, and it helps keep the conflict in check. Aside from this, parents have lives too. They need a plan around which they can go forward with work, their social life, and new relationships. Keeping to the schedule also helps to build trust by reinforcing both parents' commitment to the process and their respect for each other. Nevertheless, the most important reason to keep to the schedule is the consistency it provides the children. They expect you to be there for them and may not have developed the capacity for adapting to schedule changes. This is especially true for toddlers and preschoolers. In addition, schedule changes often are inconvenient and can make life difficult for the other parent. Keep them to a minimum. At times, adjustments are necessary but the schedule should never be considered as an outline or proposal. It is an agreement. You wouldn't keep changing the schedule on your business partner. As in business, reliability and constancy make for success in co-parenting.

We agree to respect the other parent's parenting style and discuss any concerns at agreed-upon communication times

On the one hand, you as parents may strive for consistency in raising the children in two different homes, but you also have to realize that this goal is somewhat elusive. High-conflict parents often have a serious degree of difference in parenting style. They blame, criticize, and accuse each other of not caring for the children properly, corrupting the children, or not providing a safe environment for the children. Many times this is just a reflection of two diametrically opposed parenting approaches. Remember, you divorced (or were never married) for a reason. Sometimes you just have to agree to differ on particular points, to allow you to focus on bringing about a greater level of uniformity in other areas. Relatively easy areas to agree on are daily care, scheduling, and homework. The harder areas to agree on are discipline and peer relationships. Children learn to adapt to these differences and may even learn a valuable lesson by being exposed to different viewpoints. Or they may use these differences to manipulate you both as co-parents. Be aware of what's going on in the other home but don't try to parent the children over each other's doorstep. No one has cornered the market on parenting, and believe it or not, you can learn from each other. Sometimes a method that works in one household can replace a tired and ineffective practice used by the other parent. Save your questions for your parenting call and never make evaluative statements about the other parent's approach in front of the children.

Any disagreements or areas of potential conflict will only be discussed at designated times and not in front of or in earshot of the children

This is a rule that we discussed in much detail earlier. Never expose the children to your conflicts. High-conflict parents engage in hostile interactions, not the usual form of healthy disagreement. They rarely demonstrate the capacity to have a simple discussion in front of the children. Your conflicts upset the children and put them in an untenable situation, so save your feelings for protected times when the children are not privy to your tension. Remember, they need to heal from the effects of the divorce and the marital struggles, and they need a chance to recover without being constantly reminded of your continued animosity. Act like adults and protect your children. Without this protection they may experience anxiety and depressive symptoms, which may require professional intervention.

We agree to follow the parenting schedule by always being on time for the children

This rule seemed so crucial that we gave it a place of its own. Your life is important, but remember, so are those of the other parent and the children. It is not appropriate to be more than fifteen minutes late in most other areas of your life, so have the same level of respect for your co-parent and the children. Give each other reasonable leeway, but make every effort to be

there when you say you will. In fact, we often recommend that high-conflict parents be five minutes early. Your children are counting on you to pick them up or drop them off. They should never be “left on the doorstep.” The other parent may need to leave for work, a meeting, or some other activity, and you need to be there at the agreed upon times and places. Again, teach your children the importance of timeliness and dependability by your own actions.

Any changes to the schedule must be discussed with the other parent first, prior to informing the children

When high-conflict parents are having difficulty communicating, they often rely on the children to convey information to the other parent. Parents are then placing the children in the role that should really be reserved for the other parent. They tend to discuss schedule changes and other issues directly with the children before they check it out with the other parent. Of course, the children are therefore privy to knowing the possible plans first and may be disappointed if the changes are not made. They can blame the parent who cannot or is not willing to accommodate the change. On the other hand, if the change is not something that the child wants, he/she has a chance to react before the other parent even has a chance at bat. Scheduling issues, vacations, and changes to the parenting plan must be discussed by the parents first. The decisions should be formalized before you present the information to the children. Older children (ages ten and over) may be involved in some discussions to give input where the parents deem appropriate. Remember that the child’s opinion is just input and not the final word. You, as parents, get that privilege—like it or not!

We agree never to say negative things about the other parent to or in front of the children

This is probably one of the most important parental rules. Children do not appreciate it if you insist on degrading the other parent by making unkind and critical remarks. They need and want to believe that both of their parents are doing the best that they can do to parent them. During a divorce, children are often less confident in their own judgment and also in their parents’ ability to care for them successfully. When you undermine the other parent, you take away the little confidence the child has and instead you ask them to join in a vendetta against the other parent. This and other behaviors can form the beginnings of what is called parent alienation syndrome. In high-conflict parent situations, parents break this rule constantly by taking most any opportunity to demean the other parent. This ranges from making snide personal remarks to citing specific behaviors of the other parent to which they object.

An example of this was recognized by Ann Landers in her response to a letter (published in the Hartford Courant, February 23, 2000). A “Dad in Ohio” wrote that his ex-wife was a liar as well as “conniving and manipulative.” He reported that he told the children, “Your mother loves you

very much, but she has a problem telling the truth....” He went on to say that his approach of educating the children about their mother’s shortcomings had been successful, ending his letter by saying, “Believe me, it works.” Ann Landers wisely responded by discouraging the father’s actions. She stated, “Children of divorce have a tough enough time without having a father who berates ... their mother. So, please hold the cheap shots, Dad. Those kids have enough to deal with.”

Our child/children will not be placed in any loyalty conflicts and will not be encouraged overtly or subtly to take one parent’s side against the other

Your children are not pawns in a high-stakes chess game. Children of high-conflict parents are frequently victims of loyalty conflicts. They are caught up in the process of trying to say or do what they think will please one parent vs. the other. They go back and forth between both home communicating information, comments, and offhand remarks—whatever they believe will win that parent’s support. This only puts the children in a position where they cannot be believed by anyone. Yet, high-conflict parents want to believe their children and often do. They quote the children, believing the comments to be true, and then they leap into the conflict arena. The children must not be the conveyors of parental information. Do not ask them what goes on in the other home in order to secure information. Rather than immediately believing that what they say is true, check it out with the other parent first. Children who are placed in loyalty conflicts are more prone to emotional difficulties. They can’t even rely on themselves to know or tell the truth. Their parents may reinforce this manipulative behavior for their own interests and satisfaction.

Are you willing to sacrifice your children to support leftover anger at the other parent?

It is in our child/children’s best interests to have two parents who love and care for them involved in their lives on a regular basis

Co-parenting always presupposes this rule. Postdivorce, this is your child’s best shot at a successful resolution. Unless one of you is clearly unfit, surgical removal of a parent is not in the best interests of your child. Co-parenting is even more complicated than parenting in general. The lives of your children are complicated logistically and emotionally. They need you both and you need you both. Together, you can preserve the children’s need to feel secure and loved by both parents and not force them to choose between you. This is what you expected for them when they were born, and this is what they deserve—even though you are no longer married.

We Understand that we may be divorced, separated, or never married, but we will always be the parents together for the duration of our lives or the lives of the children

You created these children together and you will be their parents together for the duration. The

end of the marriage did not end your parenting relationship together. In high-conflict cases, it may feel preferable at times to parent singly. You may believe you can make your own decisions lead your own life, not answer to anyone else, and seek no other consultation. You feel you are c your own with the children. When the hostility level gets high, this starts to sound awfully good. Nevertheless, you cannot make this choice unilaterally. The other parent is your parenting business partner, like it or not. Develop a good working relationship and get the business of parenting done well. Throughout the children's lives there will be times when you must come together: recitals, graduation, illnesses, marriages, grandchildren, etc. Be sure you are there together for all of the events and issues in their lives. As the adults in this situation, you must approach each other with the same business acumen that you would when working with your most challenging colleague.

The above parenting rules are not optional. They are necessities. High-conflict parents have great difficulty following these rules and often try to bend them to meet their own needs, because they expect flexibility from others but have problems being flexible themselves. They truly possess creative genius when it comes to rule interpretation. In one case cited by an attorney, the parents were told by the attorney for the minor children not to pass messages to each other through the older son. They agreed. The next week they didn't send messages to each other through their oldest son, but instead sent them through the middle son! In a high-conflict parenting situation, you shouldn't take anything for granted. You must make sure that the definitions, even basic "common sense" definitions, are clearly understood by both of you. Many high-conflict parents say that they agree with the above rules and are ready to sign on the dotted line, but in truth they are only giving lip service to the issues. After all, how can they express disagreement with these rules? They are straightforward and clearly in the best interests of the children. Yet overt agreement coupled with covert disagreement can be disastrous.

These rules can help you achieve collaboration and allow you to effectively master the business of co-parenting after divorce. Remember that it is easy to focus on the other parent's behavior and forget to evaluate your own honestly. Be careful and self-critical. Do not always blame the upset or misunderstanding on the other guy. You are in control of your own choices, words, and actions. Seize that control and use it wisely.

The foregoing is excerpted from "The Co-Parenting Survival Guide," by psychologists Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman. Reprinted with permission by New Harbinger Publications, Inc. Oakland, CA. www.newharbinger.com

© 2011 MSNBC Interactive. Reprints

0

0

Recommend

6 people recommend this.

4

