

Breaking Up

It's Hard To Do

Co-parenting lifestyle keeps the knot in ties that bind

by Cynthia Whitham

Three months ago Marilyn Hacker's husband of 10 years moved out. On bad days she wishes her ex would die a tortured death; on better days she'd let him off with a quick and painless demise. Anything to end all contact with him. No such luck; they have three boys. Sports events alone throw them together several times a week. He's in her life on a regular basis.

Danny and Elsa Ortega have decided to divorce. He is enraged; she is feeling guilty. Every contact is painful. They



will share parenting of their son, who has learning problems. They have to choose a special school, find a tutor, stay on top of homework and have frequent teacher conferences. They thought divorce would make things easier. It hasn't.

A year ago Joanne Johnston found out about her husband's affair. She packed her belongings and those of toddler Jessie and moved into a small apartment. Her ex shares care of their daughter on weekends and holidays. Jessie's ear infections, her second birthday party and the out-of-state visit to Grandma's all require contact. Harry hints at getting back together; Joanne dreads seeing him.

These parents all had a fantasy that separation and divorce would end the pain of the marriage and breakup. Unfortunately, it just doesn't happen that way.

Breakups are never clean. Some parents sever ties with their ex and the children, but more and more are deciding on co-parenting arrangements: children living with mom and visiting dad on weekends (or the reverse); kids living every other week with mom or dad; children staying part of the week at dad's and part of the week at mom's.

Think of the opportunities for contact—and conflict: the trade-off of the child as he goes from one home to the other; child support or other child-related money matters; birthdays and holidays; medical or dental emergencies; parties thrown by mutual friends; school events and teacher conferences; recitals; scouting; graduations; and, finally, the child's marriage and the birth of a grandchild.

The quality of parental interaction has incalculable impact on your child. As hard as it is for kids to lose their family, it is the parents' battling in front of or through the children that does the most damage.

Jessica Gillooly, Ph.D., a therapist in private practice 14 years in Los Angeles, finds that children can accept that their parents can't live together, but that it is very hard for them to accept their parents fighting or degrading each other. "When they hear parents talking disrespectfully to each other, it is a confusing and mixed message for the child," she says.

Pamela Britton White, J.D., a divorce mediator in the

Glendale area, says conflict occurs when parents can't let go of spousal battles. "They need to work together not as adversaries but as partners with a common goal—what will work best for the children."

White, who provides an alternative to an adversarial divorce process, suggests that twice yearly parents meet to address child-related issues: parenting schedules, the child's developmental needs, summer plans, longer range education plans, as well as more difficult issues pertaining to moving, remarriage or changes in the child's living situation. "Parents can have a third party there, such as a therapist with a knowledge of child development or a mediator," in order to make the interchange as productive as possible, adds White.

While some couples are comfortable with frequent contact, others choose as little of it as possible. Whether you choose to see your ex more or less, it is helpful to have guidelines to reduce conflict. Here are some ideas to help you keep your cool.

Stick to the subject

Write out an agenda if you need to; don't get sidetracked.

Don't say "always," as in, "You are always late!"

Even if it is true, your ex will attempt a defense by naming the four times in the last year he or she was on time. Instead say, "You were late Saturday. I need you to be on time this week." It's more direct and will be more effective. Don't say "never," "almost always" or "almost never" for the same reason.

Don't name call

Even if he is a bastard and she is a bitch, restrain yourself. Will pointing it out help? An ex-spouse is not likely to say, "Gee, you're right. I am quite bitchy, aren't I? Starting today I'll change."

Don't deny you did it

Rather than argue, concede your part in the problem. It can be wonderfully disarming to your ex to say, "Yes, I have

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

When separating or divorcing, couples ask me, "How can we minimize the hurt to our children?" The answer is simple: Treat each other with respect.

"Sure," you're thinking, "When she earns respect, she'll get respect." Or, "How about him treating me with respect?" Or perhaps you are too hurt at this point to do anything but trade spite remarks. But those of you who have worked hard to make your interactions with your ex cooperative, courteous or even friendly know the benefits: Your kids are showing fewer signs of distress than other children of divorce.

Improving communication can start with a simple acknowledgement on your part when your ex-spouse does something you like. If you are very angry, it may be hard to remember her doing anything you like. But think about it. You may be taking for granted behaviors other divorced parents would die for.

Perhaps the child support check comes on time or early. Maybe she returns the kids when she says she will instead of hours later or earlier. He was civil, or even warm, on the phone the other day, and out of the blue she let you change the vacation schedule without calling the attorney. And he has been handling T-ball and ballet for weeks now.

Do you want more of this behavior? Yes. Do you want to do something which will help you get it more often? Of course. So simply acknowledge the behavior with a simple phrase:

"I appreciated your . . ."

"Thanks a lot for . . ."

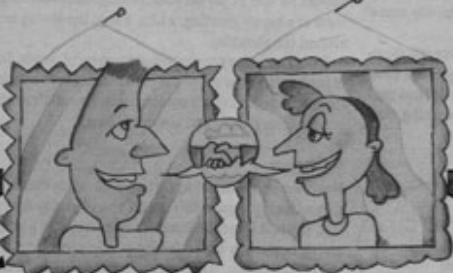
"It was very helpful when you . . ."

There needn't be any physical contact at all and your emotional response should only be genuine. An acknowledgment is a verbal, or even non-verbal, response which says, in effect, "I see what you did and I appreciate it."

If your child sees acts of kindness between his parents, it most certainly helps with the healing process and will have a positive effect on his own relationships in the future. And when you acknowledge a kind act, a nice word, your ex will tend to repeat the behavior.

Think about it. At work, if your boss says, "Great job," you continue to work hard. If an acquaintance compliments you on your hairstyle, you'll wear your hair that way more often.

So it goes with your ex-spouse. You needn't love him or even like him to have an impact on his behavior. Your simple acknowledgment will be enough to increase the odds he or she will do that good deed again.



been keeping the kids up too late. I'm working on an earlier bedtime." Then you can say, "And I'd like you to work harder on helping them get their homework done and into their backpacks."

Don't use sarcasm

Sure it feels good. But being clever at your spouse's expense won't get you what you want.

Don't cross-complain

Finish one issue before going onto another. If you allow him or her to have a say, then you can insist on having yours next.

Don't dredge up the past

It's your child's present and future that need attending to.

If your ex does or says something you like, say thanks.

If your ex does or says something you dislike, ignore it.

If your ex does something intolerable, address it in a constructive way (schedule a time to talk, mediate, consult your pastor or rabbi or therapist).

You may not want to have contact with your ex-spouse, or you may want to have more control on how and when you meet. Some tips:

- Get an answering machine and use it. Screen calls and return them when you are ready.

- Hang up the telephone if your ex gets out of control.

- Open mail from your ex or his or her attorney when you're calm. Twenty-four hours won't make a huge difference.

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- Resist the temptation to use your children to relay information.
- Exchange children at school, daycare or other scheduled activities. If you must trade off in person, use homes of a relative, neighbor or good friend, or a public restaurant or park.
- Place a traveling folder in your child's backpack for emergency numbers, medical

releases, medical insurance information and friends' phone numbers. Have your child put all school notices in that folder. Each parent is responsible for reading the contents on his or her day with the child and keeping track of scheduled events, conferences and so forth.

- Allow for reasonable changes in scheduling, but insist on a two-week or longer notice.

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