

Cooperative Co-Parenting vs. Parallel Parenting

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During and after divorce/separation, parents find that they fit into one of three types of parenting arrangements: relatively friendly co-parenting, conflicted yet fairly respectful co-parenting, and parallel parenting. These arrangements can shift as parents recover from the restructuring of their family, grieve the separation and move on into their new lives, let go of old feelings left from the relationship and learn to deal with one another in new ways. In most cases, over time, parents are able to cooperate much more effectively as they accomplish the above tasks. Some parents, however, remain firmly connected by the fight between them, and their children continue to suffer even well into adulthood. If separated parents have restraining orders, engage in high-drama behaviors with regard to one another, or are honestly afraid of one another, they should consider parallel parenting.

Parallel parenting is a term adapted from child development theory. Very young children, under age three, are able to play next to one another before they learn to play cooperatively. What this means is that they can play in the same room or sandbox or playground alongside one another, using their own toys and without any real interaction. This works as long as they do not try to take one another's toys, throw sand, etc; in other words, they leave one another alone.

Just so, some parents experience such high conflict that they are unable to work together cooperatively. So, the best that they are likely to be able to do, at this stage, is to parent in a parallel fashion.

It is clearly better for children if they are able to observe parents working together for their benefit. However, not seeing them interact is much better for children than observing parents engaging in nasty interchanges.

Here is a comparison of Cooperative Co-Parenting and Parallel Parenting:

Cooperative Co-Parenting

Parents communicate more freely and directly about large and small issues

Parenting plans can be general, flexible, negotiable

Transfers of children can be direct

Parents consult and discuss regarding children

The two households can cooperate with one another

Parallel Parenting

Parents communicate little and by neutral means. They do communicate in children's emergencies

Parenting plans must be very specific and precise to avoid conflict and the need for communication

Transfers occur at neutral locations

Parents inform one another of issues regarding children

The two households operate independently

Differing parenting styles can be discussed

Discussion of parenting styles is off-limits

Communication can be more general

Communication is strictly limited to children's issues

Meetings can be informal

Meetings, if they occur at all, are scheduled, time-limited, formal, and may require a third party

Understandings may remain unwritten

Understandings should be clearly written and sent via neutral means for clarification, agreement

More child-focused

More adult-focused

Transfers may be smoother, more relaxed

Transfers may be more abrupt as children move from one separate culture to another

No third party needed

Third party authorities may be essential to work out changes or disagreements

Parents may be able to help the child in talking about the other parent

Each parent takes charge of his/her relationship with the child, and sends the child to the other parent to discuss their separate issues

Remember that the one thing you now have in common is that you both love your children and want them to do well. When that remains the focus, it is easier to let go and leave each other alone to do the best you each can do, separately. Remember that it is better to parallel parent until you are ready to try to have more positive interchanges, because one bad exchange can sour you to trying again for a long time. Anything can happen; and frequently parents can learn to do this work much better over time!