

What's this about

Parallel Parenting?

Adapted from Parenting after Divorce: A guide to resolving conflict and meeting your children's needs
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Separating families have an important mission: To find the style of co-parenting that will help them focus on the needs of their children and avoid exerting energy in unproductive ways.

Cooperative Parenting works best for the family where conflict is low and the parents can effectively communicate about their child. Parents are able to discuss their children's needs in a healthy manner. They agree on most parenting values, are relatively consistent in their parenting, and have few arguments. They can solve differences peacefully and rarely put their children in the middle. Research shows children fare best when parents can cooperate in their parenting.

Parallel Parenting is an arrangement that can help families who experience moderate to high conflict by curtailing "conflicted parenting" that traps children in the middle of conflict. The parent's inability to separate new parent roles from old "partner" roles contributes significantly to the conflict that continues between the parents. Parallel parenting uses a two-step process to reduce the level of conflict between parents.

Step 1: Disengage From the Other Parent

Disengaging means establishing a "demilitarized zone" around your children and having little contact directly with the other parent. This limits the opportunity for new conflicts to develop. Disengaged parenting has a drawback because it is uncoordinated parenting, but you must disengage first to reduce the conflict. It is then crucial to move on to the next step.

Step 2: Parent "Next" To Each Other

Parallel parenting is a process for parenting next to one another because you are unable to parent together. Before you can learn to co-parent effectively, you will each sharpen your parenting skills your own.

Sharing Important Information: Parents do not communicate with each other about minor things or issues that have always led to conflicts in the past. You will give the other parent "important" information about your child (health, welfare, and child's activities), but you will not get into debates about the parenting plan or each other's parenting style. Each parent should develop an independent relationship with your child's teachers, doctors, coaches and friends so that you don't have to rely on the other parent for information.

Communicate In Writing: Non-emergency communication is best done by mail, fax or e-mail. By putting the communication in writing, you will have time to gather your thoughts and make sure that the tone is not argumentative. Try to limit non-emergency communications to twice a month (unless the information is time-sensitive). Don't share your written communications with the children; the purpose is to share important information between parents. By minimizing general communications and putting necessary communications in writing, you will go a long way toward disengaging from conflict.

Parent Notebook: For young children, it is important to share detailed information with other care providers. A useful tool is the “parent communication notebook.” In this notebook each parent writes down the highlights of the child’s behaviors during the time the parent is on-duty. Include observations of your child’s health, feeding and sleeping patterns, daily routine, and development milestones. This notebook stays with your child and travels back and forth so both parents can use it as needed.

Focus On Your Own Parenting: Accept that there is more than one “right way” to parent. Learn to be less rigid and more accepting of appropriate parenting by the other parent. Rather than trying to change how the other parent does the job, focus on doing your best job of parenting during the time your child is with you, without criticizing the other parent. Children are capable of being successfully parented in two different ways.

Conflict Management: Another factor in parallel parenting is ignoring (rather than arguing back) when the other parent tries to tell you how to parent. Support different styles of parenting in order to avoid conflict. Obviously, some things are very important, such as adequate supervision, giving necessary medical attention, and ensuring that your child gets to school on time with homework completed. If you have concerns about very important issues, you will need a forum for working out your differences, such as mediation, use of a parenting counselor, or a third party evaluation. Court battles increase family stress and conflict. Resorting to the court to resolve a conflict is an extraordinary measure and should be reserved for times when there is no other way to solve the problem.

Have a Specific Schedule: Your parenting plan should be as specific as possible so that each parent knows their responsibilities for the time they are the on-duty parent with the child. The standard language of a custody order may be so vague that there is opportunity for disagreement about almost everything. The amount of detail depends on the level of conflict between parents. By creating a well thought out parenting plan, you can save yourself from a headache later.

Live by the Plan: Of course, once you have a parenting plan, it is critical that you abide by it. If you continue to argue about all of its details, the chaos of conflict will continue. The schedule cannot be adjusted by either parent without mutual agreement. Abiding by your schedule reduces the conflict that frequently accompanies making changes.

All families have problems that need solving. If the problems don’t get solved, they may create a great degree of anger and frustration, which is difficult for you and hurts your children. By finding a way to manage conflict, you’ll be helping yourself as well as improving the quality of parenting for your child.

Parallel Parenting Resources

Child Custody: Building Parenting Agreements That Work, by Mimi Lyster, Nolo Press (1995)

Joint Custody with a Jerk, by Julie Ross & Judith Corcoran, St. Martin’s Press (1996)

Parenting After Divorce, by Philip Stahl, Impact Pub. (2000)