



FCS-2428

What are Co-Parenting Styles?

January 2025

Co-parenting is when two parents work together to raise their children, even if they are no longer in a romantic relationship. How well parents co-parent depends on how much they cooperate or experience conflict (Baril et al., 2007). When parents cooperate, it can mean they share responsibilities for the kids, respect each other, support each other emotionally and with tasks, solve problems together and communicate well (Feinberg, 2003; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). On the other hand, conflict in co-parenting can happen when parents argue about raising the children, undermine each other, create tension or act in hurtful ways (Camisasca et al., 2022; Feinberg, 2003; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Rather than looking at these behaviors one by one, it can be helpful to group co-parents based on their overall style of working together (Ahrns, 1994; Ahrns, 2007; Amato et al., 2011; Lamela et al., 2016). Research has shown that divorced or divorcing parents usually fall into one of six common co-parenting styles (Ahrns, 1994; Ahrns, 2007; Amato et al., 2011; Maccoby et al., 1993).

1. **Perfect Pals:** Even though they are no longer a couple, “Perfect Pals” remain good friends. They can talk easily about their children and other parts of their lives without any tension. They often share custody and can make decisions about their kids together without arguing. Both parents stay very involved in their children’s lives and remain friendly with each other (Ahrns, 1994; Ahrns, 2007).
2. **Cooperative Colleagues:** Cooperative Colleagues may not be close friends, but they work well together for their children’s sake. They have a business-like relationship, where they put their past issues aside and focus on parenting as part of their job. Although they may have some disagreements, they can solve problems and make decisions about their kids without much trouble (Ahrns, 1994, Ahrns, 2007).
3. **Parallel Parents:** Isolated Individuals are co-parents who choose to parent separately. Each parent has their own time with the children, but they don’t make decisions together or try to influence how the other parent handles things. They prefer to have little contact with each other and are fine with letting the other parent take care of the children their own way (Amato et al., 2011; Maccoby et al., 1993).
4. **Angry Associates:** Angry Associates have a hard time separating their negative feelings about each other from their co-parenting duties, which makes it difficult for them to manage conflict. Their co-parenting style is often marked by tension, hostility and frequent disagreements, though not always explosive fights. Even though they may try to cooperate, they often argue over the details (Ahrns, 1994; Ahrns, 2007).
5. **Fiery Foes:** Fiery Foes have the hardest time co-parenting. They rarely talk to each other, but when they do, it often turns into a fight because of the hurt from their separation. Their breakup may have involved long legal battles, and they still argue over decisions for their kids. Anger and big conflicts are common, and they can’t seem to think or talk positively about each other to their children. They usually need a third party, like a lawyer, friend, or judge to help them settle their disagreements (Ahrns, 1994, Ahrns, 2007).
6. **Dissolved Duos:** Sometimes after a divorce or separation, one parent essentially disappears and no longer has contact with their co-parent or their kids. These parents are called Dissolved Duos. Unlike co-parents who take turns caring for their children, in Dissolved Duos, only one parent takes care of the kids and acts like a single parent. If the other parent is involved at all, it’s usually very little and not regular (Ahrns, 1994; Ahrns, 2007).

Which Co-Parenting Styles are the Best?

Kids tend to do better when their parents cooperate and don't fight (Beckmeyer et al., 2021; Camisasca et al., 2022; Payne, 2023; Zou et al., 2020). Perfect Pals get along well, but this kind of co-parenting only works for a small number of people (Ahrns, 1994; Ahrns, 2007; Payne, 2023). For most, staying close friends is too hard, especially if there were hurt feelings in the breakup or if new relationships form (Ahrns, 2007).

A Cooperative Colleagues relationship is easier to maintain. It's like working together as business partners to raise the kids, which can feel simpler than staying friends, especially when there's still some hurt from the divorce. Both styles work because parents support each other and share responsibilities (Ahrns, 2007; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). The key is having a clear plan for raising the kids. Even though plans may need to change as kids grow or situations come up, cooperation and compromise keep fights to a minimum. Kids benefit from seeing their parents get along and knowing they can still have a good relationship with both (Hetherington & Stanley & Hagan, 1999).

Even though their parents don't exactly work together, kids of Dissolved Duos and Parallel Parents usually do ok because they aren't caught in fights between their parents (Kelly, 2000). For Parallel Parents, the parents practice what's called parallel parenting, where they don't try to control how the other parent interacts with the kids (Amato et al., 2011). Though it may not be the best situation for kids, the parents often try to avoid each other because of the hurt from the separation, even at school or sports events. Kids of Dissolved Duos may feel anger or sadness because a parent is missing from their lives, but they often do better than kids whose parents are constantly fighting (Hetherington & Stanley & Hagan, 1999; Payne, 2023). That's because arguments between parents are more harmful to kids than having one parent not around (Payne, 2023). For parents who can't be Cooperative Colleagues or Perfect Pals, parenting separately like Isolated Individuals can be a better way to avoid conflict.

What's the Danger of Co-Parenting Conflict?

Kids whose parents have more conflict, like Fiery Foes or Angry Associates, are more likely to feel caught in the middle of their parents' arguments. Kids are sensitive to their parents' conflict and do worse with more intense conflict, such as that shown by Fiery Foes (Camara & Resnick, 1989; Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Payne, 2023). This kind of co-parenting is called high conflict because of the strong emotions involved. Parents in these situations often send messages through their kids, fight in front of them, or say bad things about the other parent, which can make kids feel anxious, sad or even blame themselves (Lamela et al., 2016). Fiery Foes and Angry Associates struggle to set boundaries, often ignore or don't follow the plans they've made, and tend to blame each other for the problems in their co-parenting relationship.

Can Co-Parenting Styles Change?

Co-parenting styles can change over time. Many co-parents find that they move into different styles as their feelings settle down, they learn what works best, they may bring new people into the family (like when they remarry), or as their children's needs change as they grow up (Ahrns, 2007). If you and your co-parent are Fiery Foes or Angry Associates, it might be important to change your co-parenting style for the sake of your children. Try to learn how to avoid conflict with each other and think about how you could become Cooperative Colleagues or Isolated Individuals. It's also a good idea to get help from a trained professional, such as a therapist or counselor, to learn how to communicate and problem solve more effectively with your co-parent.

References

- Ahrns, C. R. (1994). *The good divorce: Keeping your family together when your marriage comes apart*. Harper Collins.
- Ahrns, C. R. (2007). Family ties after divorce: Long-term implications for children. *Family Process*, 46(1), 53-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2006.00191.x>
- Amato, P. R., Kane, J. B., & James, S. (2011). Reconsidering the "good divorce." *Family Relations*, 60(5), 511-524. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2011.00666.x>
- Baril, M. E., Crouter, A. C., & McHale, S. M. (2007). Processes linking adolescent well-being, marital love, and coparenting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21(4), 645-654. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.645>
- Beckmeyer, J. J., Krejnick, S. J., Mccray, J. A., Troilo, J., & Markham, M. S. (2021). A multidimensional perspective on former spouses' ongoing relationships: Associations with children's postdivorce well-being. *Family Relations*, 70(2), 467-482. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12504>
- Camara, K. A., & Resnick, G. (1989). Styles of conflict resolution and cooperation between divorced parents: Effects on child behavior and adjustment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59(4), 560-575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1989.tb02747.x>
- Camisasca, E., Miragoli, S., Di Blasio, P., & Feinberg, M. (2022). Pathways among negative co-parenting, parenting stress, authoritarian parenting style, and child adjustment: The emotional dysregulation driven model. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 31(11), 3085-3096. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-022-02408-9>
- Feinberg, M. E. (2003). The internal structure and ecological context of coparenting: A framework for research and intervention. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 3(2), 95-131. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327922PAR0302_01
- Goeke-Morey, M. C., Cummings, E. M., Harold, G. T., & Shelton, K. H. (2003). Categories and continua of destructive and con-

- structive marital conflict tactics from the perspective of U.S. and Welsh children. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17(3), 327–338. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.17.3.327>
- Hetherington, E. M., & Stanley-Hagan, M. (1999). The adjustment of children with divorced parents: a risk and resiliency perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40(1), 129–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00427>
- Kelly, J. B. (2000). Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 39(8), 963–973. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-200008000-00007>
- Lamela, D., Figueiredo, B., Bastos, A., & Feinberg, M. (2016). Typologies of post-divorce coparenting and parental well-being, parenting quality and children's psychological adjustment. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 47(5), 716–728. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-015-0604-5>
- Maccoby, E. E., Buchanan, C. M., Mnookin, R. H., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1993). Postdivorce roles of mothers and fathers in the lives of their children. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7(1), 24–38. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.7.1.24>
- Payne, J. (2023). Co-parenting styles, custody, and parenting conflict prior to divorce as predictors of child outcomes in divorce. [Unpublished master's thesis, Oklahoma State University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Whiteside, M. F., & Becker, B. J. (2000). Parental factors and the young child's postdivorce adjustment: A meta-analysis with implications for parenting arrangements. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14(1), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.14.1.5>
- Zou, S., Wu, X., & Li, X. (2020). Coparenting behavior, parent-adolescent attachment, and peer attachment: An examination of gender differences. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49(1), 178–191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01068-1>



Peer Reviewed

Matt Brosi

Professor, Human Development and Family Science

Jana Payne

Graduate Research Assistant, Human Development and Family Science



Scan the code or visit extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets for more OSU Extension fact sheets.

EDUCATION EVERYWHERE FOR EVERYONE
Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

Oklahoma State University, as an equal opportunity employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination and affirmative action. Oklahoma State University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all individuals and does not discriminate based on race, religion, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability or veteran status with regard to employment, educational programs and activities, and/or admissions. For more information, visit <https://eoo.okstate.edu>.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. MR January, 2025.