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Shared Parental Responsibility Before and After Divorce

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In America, divorce has traditionally been an adversarial proceeding. One parent, usually the mother, received sole custody while the other, usually the father, received visitation rights and paid child support. The system encouraged competition and combat between parents who were already not getting along. Parents were “waging interpersonal warfare with the children caught in the cross-fire” (Turkat, 2002, p. 389). “The parents’ experience in the child custody court taught them nothing but bitterness and anger toward each other. It was highly doubtful that they would ever speak to each other civilly again, much less consult each other about future decisions in their child’s life” (Schepard, 2004, p. xiii). Children suffer from: broken attachments with one or both parents, exposure to parental conflict, instability in their lives, and a decline in their standard of living (Kelly, 2000 as cited in Kruk, 2005, p. 124). It is not surprising that “most family scholars agree that when parental conflict is high and/or parents are adversarial, divorce has negative long-term consequences for many children” (Amato, 2003, p. 332).

This is not necessarily the case when parents can work together in a way that promotes consistency, acceptance, safety, love, etc., for the children. One approach that offers parents strategies for developing this type of post-divorce relationship is called shared parental responsibility or co-parenting, which focuses on parental responsibility and reduction of harm to children. It “focuses attention away from parental ‘rights’ toward a consideration of children’s fundamental needs, and parental and societal obligations or responsibilities to meet those needs” (Kruk, 2005, p. 123).

With this approach parents write “parenting plans” describing “the division of parental decision-making, parenting time, and residential arrangements” (Schepard, 2004, p. 48). The form for a basic parenting plan is included in Emily M. Douglas’ book titled *Mending Broken Families*. The wording of the parenting plans replaces adversarial terms such as “physical custody” and “legal custody” with more neutral language such as “custodial responsibility,” “parenting time,” “residence,” and “decision-making responsibility” (Schepard, 2004, p. 48). “Here children’s needs become a means of connecting the parents in a positive direction at a time when conflict has divided them” (Kruk, 2005, p. 134). The plans help empower parents to resolve their own disputes. The shared parental responsibility approach expects that children will be “provided continuity and stability in their attachment and relationship with each of their parents, as the post-separation parenting arrangements will reflect pre-separation patterns of child care” (Kruk, 2005, p. 134).

The shared parenting approach provides “the best living arrangements for children ... equal amounts of time with each parent” (Fabricius, 2003, p. 387; Wade & Smart, 2003, p. 107). Even though children feel strongly about the need to be fair to both parents, the constant moving between households frequently stresses them. Because their time is carefully divided between households, “some older children wished that they had more time for themselves” (Wade & Smart, 2003, p. 113). They also wanted more time for an active social life. Some courts order parents to live within a certain distance to accommodate children’s participation in afterschool activities.

Constantly moving between homes also stressed children. “Bags had to be packed and unpacked, school books and kits had to be organized so that they were at the right home at the right time, and homework had to be coordinated with changeovers Parents, on the other hand, always had half of their time to themselves” (Wade & Smart, 2003, p. 114). Parents should consider moving the children less frequently, perhaps having them spend one week at mom’s and the next week at dad’s instead of moving them every two to three days.

Lack of personal space is also an issue for children whose divorced parents share responsibilities. While each child might have had their own bedroom before the divorce, after the divorce they may have to share with a sibling since one or both parents may live in a smaller home due to financial constraints. Space issues become bigger challenges as parents remarry and step-siblings enter the household. Parents can help with this by making sure that each child has a space to call their own. Another solution that is becoming more popular is allowing the children to live in the family home and having each parent rotate in when they are responsible for parenting (Kruk, 2005, p. 137).

According to recent research, when children of divorce spent equal time and had “high-quality relationships with each of their parents . . . they actually fared somewhat bet-

ter” (Fabricius, 2003, pp. 393–394) than children from married families with poorer relationships.

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