

PRINCIPLES OF JOINT PARENTING

Memo prepared by DeRusha Law Firm

“...we are not shaped as much by our actual experiences as how we are taught to respond to them”.¹

Separation and divorce is a difficult time for all members of a family. Each family member defines their relationships differently. That is, the relationship between the husband and the wife is very different than the relationship between parents and their children. The relationship between one parent and each of their children is separate and distinct as well. Consequently, when a family dissolves, individual relationships, together with the family relationship as a whole, are redefined and the unit undertakes to reconstruct.

The following principles are basic, common sense guidelines that everyone involved sometimes forgets in the “heat of the battle”:

1. The child’s age should be taken into careful consideration when their new world begins to take shape;
2. Be as honest as you can with your child and present only what can reasonably be understood/processed but, do this honestly;
3. Hiding “things” from your children that they should be able to handle could create a situation whereby the children become uneasy and insecure in their own world. Do not engage in less than honest dialogue with your children - they pick up on this immediately;
4. Keep in mind that children are not unaware just because they are little people. For the most part, they pick up on much more than adults think they do;
5. It is important to remember that the husband/wife relationship came to an end. The parent/child relationship did not. Any extra pressure that is placed on children to cope with the dissolution of their parent’s marriage must be avoided. Children are not to be used as referees nor as informants;
6. The children’s parameters should remain as intact as possible. If, when the family was intact, a strict code of supervision was followed, this should not change. Consistency is

¹ M. Gary Neuman, “Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way”1998, Random House, p.

important;

7. Fundamental values should not be diluted;
8. Parents ought to avoid “buying their children” by showering them with gifts or money to “make up for” the dissolution of the family unit. This creates a psychology of entitlement and sends wrong messages;
9. Children ought not to be left alone in new environment such as a parent’s new home; This new experience should be undertaken with the parent together with the child as they all become used to their new surroundings;
10. The children must be able to communicate with the other parent at *all* times. This means that a telephone or a computer must be made available to facilitate the child’s communication with their parent and vice versa;
11. Parents must encourage communication with the other parent while they are exercising access/visitation schedules;
12. Parents must encourage and support the children to spend time with the other parent;
13. Each parent must keep in mind that the dissolution of the family began when the marriage came to an end however, they remain, and always will be, the children’s parents. It is *vital* that parents do not draw their children into their battles and they remain as supportive as possible of their former spouse. If this is not possible, then it is advisable that neither parent saying anything at all about their former spouse. The divorce is not the children’s battle, as such, they should not be considered participants;
14. The parents must, as much as possible, maintain the same level of involvement in the children’s lives. For example, the responsibility for school projects can be divided equally between the parents. This may be a difficult task to co-ordinate however, the children could be consulted about which parent they would like to help with a particular project;
15. If there is a set of circumstances whereby one parent undertakes most of the responsibility for helping the child with projects, studying for tests and the like (which is typically what happens in every family), that parent must refrain from “bad-mouthing” the other parent because they are not there to help. The child should never be made to feel as if he or she is a burden to either parent, that they are the possession of either parent and that the quantum of fun is doled out inequitably with one parent being the authoritarian and responsible for all of the “grunt work” and the other parent the “fun” parent;
16. When the time comes for a parent to introduce a new person in their life to the children,

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- this should be done carefully and with some thought. Although both spouses should “move on” with their lives, this is a delicate topic and there will likely be fall-out from the former spouse. Without a doubt, this is a difficult time emotionally for all concerned;
17. If at all possible, consultation with the former spouse before the children are introduced to the new person can avoid unnecessary turmoil. Understanding that co-operation is not likely, each parent ought to be aware of the feelings of their former spouse and be patient during this period of reorganization;
 18. What must be avoided at all times are conversations (especially disparaging ones), between the new person and the parent about their former spouse in front of the children;
 19. A new person in a parent's life will redefine the parent/child relationship. Care must be taken to avoid a situation whereby the children feel as if the other parent is being replaced and that they are being replaced;
 20. Children should never be drawn interrogation sessions. This puts the children in an awkward position and it is unfair;
 21. If the “new person” has children, care must be taken to avoid packaging this new unit as a “ready-made family”. The children's world has been dramatically altered and the expectation that a “new family” will replace the former unit is fraught with problems and unrealistic expectations;
 22. Children do not regard their parents as “people”, they are parental units. This will be the first time the children see that their parents have an identity separate and apart from being a parent. How this is handled by the adults is crucial to how the children will cope; lastly,
 23. Parents are people too. They will make mistakes during the separation and divorce process however, it is important to remember that children take their cues from their parents.

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