

BUILDING BLOCKS



OF EFFECTIVE
CO-PARENTING

PURPOSE

The purpose of this training is to help participants identify successful strategies entitled The Building Blocks of Effective Co-Parenting. It is important to note that each situation is individual in many ways however there are some core fundamental concepts that are relevant to all scenarios.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this program is to provide psycho-education to parents who are divorcing or experiencing separation. This training will help them understand the importance of effective co-parenting, particularly as it relates to children. Participants will be provided strategies on ways to reduce stress, disruption, and unhealthy transitions.

Session Length: 6 Total Hours

Materials needed:

-Laptop -Projector -Name Tags -Easel Paper -Markers -Note paper -yoyo's
-Manilla folders -Daily Feedback Form

Video Clips (provided): Feelings Chart / Looking Back, Looking Forward

Prior to participants arriving, facilitators will place yo-yos on the table. As they arrive participants will be encouraged to play with the yo-yo's as they await the beginning of class. Observations will be made how different participants manipulate the yo-yos in front of them. Facilitators will make observations connected to how individuals played with the yo-yo's. Facilitator will share a story regarding their own personal experiences using yo-yo's as a child. Facilitators will ask if anyone in the group would like to share an experience they recall using yo-yo's growing up. Next the facilitator will show an old-school yo-yo commercial and then we'll ask if anyone would be willing to volunteer to show a trick (https://www.youtube.com/shared?ci=apAmOKw_CPM).

Participants will be acknowledged and applauded for their participation. At this point the facilitator will point out yo-yo's were created for recreational use and are intended to vacillate back and forth but children are not. Facilitators will make the connection that many kids feel like yo-yo's when parents are divorcing and separating and they feel increased pressure to pick sides and form alliances. Facilitators will reinforce the importance of learning how to develop effective strategies for effective co-parenting.

The facilitators will introduce themselves and pass out name tags to participants. Participants will be asked to draw an image that represents their children on the back of the card. As they introduce themselves they will be asked to share their name and the image on the back of the name tags. After everyone is done introducing themselves facilitator will make the connection the primary focus is to find ways to increase their ability effectively co-parent for the sake of their children.

The group will be will take this opportunity to address the proverbial elephant in the room. Facilitators will acknowledge the fact that the majority of participants have been mandated to attend this training. Although this has been court ordered, participants will be informed that this training is designed to reinforce existing concepts they have about effective co-parenting, provide new strategies, and also equip them with additional ways to bridge gaps during this challenging transition. Facilitator will take a moment to gain some feedback from participants about their willingness and desire to be in attendance. Facilitator will make efforts to leave this conversation on a positive strengths-based, solution-focused note.

Team Agreements.

Facilitator will acknowledge throughout the course of this six-hour training lots of feelings and emotions may arise. Many folks are in the middle of some of the most turbulent times in their lives. Facilitator will take the opportunity to introduce the concept of creating team agreements. Brief discussion will be held about the difference between ground rules and team agreements. Ground rules has an authoritative tone suggesting participants must follow direct orders from the instructor. Team agreements suggest a level of inclusion and gives participants the opportunity to contribute to the culture and the climate of the program. Facilitator will ask the group what are some items they believe should be included in our teamwork agreement list. Facilitator will be sure the list includes the following: confidentiality, open-mindedness, and being respectful. Facilitator will capture their suggestions on easel paper and will ensure it is visible throughout each training session. Other housekeeping issues will be discussed such as start and end times, bathroom breaks, and the presence of food and beverages in the training facility.

Turn Back the Clock

Facilitator will introduce the section entitled Turn Back the Clock. Facilitator will call attention to a series of slides that represent different stages of pregnancy and the early years of Parenthood. During each slide participants will be asked if they can go back and think about some of those positive memories they associate to that process. Many participants may have answers surrounding baby showers, picking out baby names, and purchasing items for the baby. The facilitator will make efforts to get participants to go back to a nostalgic place that was positive at the time. After this takes place the facilitator will ask participants the rhetorical question “How did things go from so good to where they are today”?

Activity:

Participants will be ask to complete the worksheet called “Looking Back, Looking Forward”. This exercise will help them recall positive memories from the past and focus on achievements they are hoping to accomplish in the near future.

Facilitator will outline top 6 reasons why contemporary relationships fail which include:

1. Unfaithful
2. Breakdown in communication
3. Finances
4. Unsuccessful co-parenting
5. Influence of social media
6. Individuals grow apart.

Activity:

Group members will be asked to think of ways children were often described when they were growing up. Facilitator will ask someone to explain the phrase: “Children are to be seen and not heard”. Participants will be asked their opinions on that statement. Facilitator will introduce a clip entitled: “ You have to hear this 6 year old girl’s advice for her divorcing parents” (<https://youtu.be/DITdTSmdB98>) which will highlight on little girl’s awareness of what is taking place.

Facilitator will have a “fishbowl” filled with faces representing different emotions and it will be passed around the room. Participants will be asked to pick a face (emotion) that best represents how you feel about their current relationship. Facilitator will ask each person why they chose what they selected. They will all be thanked for their participation.

Facilitators will acknowledge these times can be very difficult for adults to manage however it is the kids who suffer the most.

Facilitators will highlight 3 major emotions children often have when adult relationships

1. Blame.

Based on children's developmental and cognitive ability many children believe that separation is directly related to them. Many children have the belief if they were just a better child then maybe mommy and daddy would not fight so much.

This type of perceived guilt is very rare real for many children, resulting in a reduction of confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth.

2. Guilt.

Many children feel they have to pick sides between parents who are separating. This can be confusing and anxiety provoking as they may feel they have to pick one over the other. Children at very young developmental stages are very concrete and feel they can only successfully master one task at any given time. An example of this would be similar to this like a child who will only color with one crayon at a time. In the minds of young children, choosing to care about one parent (Mommy) can infer in their minds they no longer love the other (Daddy). This can cause a variety of social and emotional setbacks including aggressive behavior, regressive behavior, and the emergence of other unwanted behavior.

3. Resentment.

Some children may experience forms of resentment directed towards both parents. With pre-adolescent and teenagers their social well-being is extremely important to them. Sometimes resentment can develop if there is an abrupt change in their school setting, residency, or participation in organized groups or activities. If one of the parties that has been labeled as the at-fault parent resentment can develop towards that parent. If there was an incident of infidelity and one of the parents asks the other one to leave, the home can also be a form of resentment for the non-forgiving parent as well. Facilitator will emphasize the fact despite whether this is accurate or not these are examples of common feelings children can experience when there is divorce and separation.

Facilitators will acknowledge these times can be very difficult for adults to manage however it is the kids who suffer the most.

Facilitator will introduce the concept for the building blocks for successful co-parenting (ABC).

Facilitator will introduce Block A and show the corresponding slide.

A Block A: Acceptance, Acknowledgement, and Accountability

Acceptance-

Acceptance is the notion that you acknowledge major occurrences have taken place significant enough to result in your relationship coming to an end.

Acceptance does not blame or point fingers, rather it is a conscience understanding the relationship has concluded.

Acknowledgment-

Acknowledgement in this sense simply means there is some sense of individual ownership. Acknowledging the fact that at one point in time there was an amicable relationship substantial enough for both parties to take the relationship the highest level by conceiving a child. Although there may be valid reasons why the relationship is over it is possible your child can inherit some of the positive attributes from your former partner.

Accountability-

As the old adage goes "It takes two to tango". This is not an admission of guilt or fault however we are asking participants to do some reflection and think about direct or subtle rolls they may have played and arriving at the point of separation.

This is very difficult for many to do especially if you believe you are the not at fault party. Examples of accountability could be subtle things such as: rushing into a relationship, having an unbalanced work/home schedule, or not be prepared to be in a committed relationship.

Boundaries-

Facilitator will introduce the topic of boundaries and the importance they have with separated partners. Facilitator will ask for examples of unhealthy boundaries between separating parents. Facilitator will capture them on flip chart or easel paper. Facilitator will ask for examples of healthy boundaries between separated parents. Facilitator will capture them on flip chart easel paper. Facilitator will ensure participants will be covered in detail:

Examples of Healthy Boundaries-

- *Being on time for scheduled drop-off and pick-up times.*
- *Not asking questions about the other party's personal or romantic life.*
- *Keeping telephone calls and correspondence solely related to the overall well-being of your child.*
- *Not making suggestive or flirty comments during drop-offs and pick-ups.*

Based on the group list of examples, the facilitators will break them into groups ask them to provide scenarios related to their list and have them act out in role-play scenarios. They will be asked to act out the unhealthy scenarios first and facilitators will assist. After they have acted unhealthy ways participants will be asked to role play again, this time from a strengths-based perspective.

Balance

Although separated parents are not be living together, they both have the opportunity to have an impact on the overall growth and development of their children. Many times the non-custodial parent feels they have lesser influence because the child may not spend the same amount of time with them related to the custodial parent. Co-parenting is a collaborative effort and both parties should have equal opportunity to co-parent when all possible. For example, mothers should not feel like they bear the burden of all the day-to-day responsibilities regarding the child. There's a great misconception that if the non-custodial parent is paying child support his role as caregiver has somehow been satisfied. Facilitators will emphasize the importance of establishing a healthy balance which will be discussed in Greater detail in Block "C".

Benefit of the Doubt

Facilitator will lead discussion on what it means to give somebody the benefit of the doubt. Facilitators will ask for examples, and if the group cannot come up with any some will be provided. Facilitators will ask questions about why it is challenging for some co-parents to give the other party the benefit of the doubt.

Facilitator will ask for reasons or why that may be difficult. Responses should include comments like: Wondering if the basic needs of the child(ren) are being met while in the care of the non-custodial parent (eating, bathing, etc). Facilitator will capture their thoughts on whiteboard or easel paper. Ask participants to discuss how it makes the other parent feel when the benefit of the doubt is not provided. Look for answers like: not feeling validated, a reduced sense of self-worth, and upset at insinuation they would allow any harm to happen to their child.

C Block C: Communication, Collaboration, Commitment

Communication-

Communication is referring to how you hear, retain, and share information. One of the biggest frustrations parents who are living separate with children is the lack of communication. There are a variety of different learning styles and listening skills. To effectively communicate with others you will be most successful if you are familiar with the way the other party hears and interprets information.

Facilitator will show clip: "The 5 Languages of Love"

(<https://youtu.be/lijKBFmAZes>).

Scientifically men and women interpret scenarios very differently, particularly as it relates to discipline and nurturing. When communication is working properly it can strengthen the overall relationship and lessen confusion. When communication is not effective it can turn into disagreements, arguments, or worse. Many times the breakdown in communication plays a direct role in the current state of the relationship, so there are also words that we want to stay away from which could be triggers or reminders of times past. Once those feelings of devalue begin to happen, effective communication evaporates quickly. For example "You don't listen", "You only hear what you want", "That's not what I said", "You always cut me off". Facilitator will lead a discussion on what are the barriers in maintaining appropriate communication with parents who are not getting along?

Communication (cont.)

Facilitator will pass out and discuss resource entitled: **“Relationship Conflict Resolution”**. Facilitator will walk them through each suggested strategy. They will also be reminded these suggestions do not happen overnight, and this will likely take time to become fully effective. Facilitator will acknowledge the fact there are multiple levels of contact between adults with children. Participants will be asked to identify ways communication can take place with:

- *Without direct contact between Parents t contact between Parents*
- *Limited contact between Parents*
- *Fluid contact between Parents*

Facilitator will ask participants to identify ways that effective co-parenting can take place with limited contact between both parties. Answers should include responses like: email and text messaging, neutral pick-up and drop-off locations, and sharing correspondence teachers and coaches.

Facilitator will ask the group for suggestions on how effective co-parenting can be successful in fluid relationships. Answers should include: open access to children, parent Mutual support and participation school events and recreational activities and the ability to Pick-up and drop-off child the alternate parent's.

Collaboration

Facilitator will lead discussion on the importance of collaboration. This refers to individuals working together to accomplish an established and unified goal. This is extremely important when working towards effective co-parenting. When working together parents can celebrate shared successes, and the children also benefit.

Commitment

Facilitator will introduce conversation on how communication has changed over time. Discussion will be made regarding the great advancements technology has made. Facilitator will have the group participate in an exercise identifying the pros and the cons of Technology. Group members will be asked to identify the Pros answers to the group and they will be captured on easel paper or whiteboard. Facilitator will ensure answers will include responses like: allows people to capture moments (cameras), share them with others (email, texts), maintain long distance communication (facebook).

Facilitator will then ask group members to identify the Cons answers to the group and they will be captured on easel paper or whiteboard. Facilitator will ensure responses include: Lack of person connection, people say things they might not say in person, and miscommunication can take place. Facilitator will also emphasize how reputations can be negatively impacted, and when things are posted online they do not go away. Participants will watch video which discusses the long-term impact misused social media can have entitled: "Facebook and

Activity:

Facilitator will split the group up into 3 equal groups and each one will be given a case scenario. The task will be to discuss the vignette and then answer the corresponding questions. Each group will be asked to role play the situation to the other participants. Observers will be asked to answer to pre-written questions. After the questions are answered, the group will role play the scenario again, this time resulting in a positive outcome.

Volunteers: Mother, Non-Custodial Father, 12 year old boy

Dad is on his way to drop off his young child back to Mother after a court ordered visit. Although there have been no issues, Mom is reluctant to having the young baby stay with Dad overnight because she is not confident he can care for the baby like she can. Dad is now dating someone else who has volunteered to drive him to the ex-girlfriend's home because it is now raining. Now 20 minutes late, Dad approaches the home with Mom anxiously waiting at the door. She immediately begins escalating and berating him with questions. A shouting match begins and he is on the porch holding his daughter.

1. Describe what feelings Mom may be experiencing as they arrive:
2. What questions may Mom be asking that may appear negative or condescending to Dad? How might Dad feel about being questioned?
3. How can this impact the child, and the value of co-parenting?
4. Considering the ABC Model, what principle(s) were overlooked in the co-parenting relationship?
5. Considering the ABC Model, how could things be done differently?

Volunteers: Mother, Non-Custodial Father, 12 year old boy

Mother and Father have an amicable and informal parenting agreement which covers visitation and financial responsibilities. They have a 50/50 arrangement where their son rotates from each home on a weekly basis (switch every other week) so he can stay in the same school district. Mom picks up their son from school Monday and her son tells her he wants to play basketball for the team. Dad believes this will help him with structure and discipline. He has already signed the permission slip and practice will be held two nights every week. Mother supports the concept of extracurricular activities but she believes it is a privilege. Their son's grades are marginal, and she has been having issues with him talking back at home which Dad is not aware of. Mom tells her son she is not in support of this and her son accused her of not being fair.

1. Describe what feelings Mom may be experiencing hearing this information for the first time:
2. What does both parent's lack of information sharing suggest about their existing relationship?
3. How can this impact the child, and his perception of co-parenting?
4. Considering the ABC Model, what principle(s) were overlooked in the co-parenting relationship?
5. Considering the ABC Model, how could things been done differently?

Volunteers: Mother, Father, 17 year old daughter

You are a happily married stay at home mother of three children. Your oldest (boys) are away at school and your 17 year old daughter will be off to college soon. Her teenage years have given you and your husband a run for your money, as she is very private with her friends and her plans for the future. One night she confides in you about a boy she has been dating for quite some time. She likes him very much and thinks it may be moving to the next level. She asks you not to tell your husband because he is so strict and always embarrasses the boys she likes. Today you get a call from school indicating she did not show up. You and your husband sit her down and she admits she skipped school to be with her boyfriend. You express your discontent and impulsively say: "How could you keep this from me after all the covering I've done for you from father!" Dad is now aware he has been kept in the dark about her daughter and now is questioning what else he is unaware of.

1. Describe what feelings Dad may be experiencing in this moment:
2. Why do you think Mom's reaction was so strong?
3. How can this impact the child, and the value of co-parenting?
4. Considering the ABC Model, what principle(s) were overlooked in the co-parenting relationship?
5. Considering the ABC Model, how could things been done differently?

Facilitator will acknowledge this could be a very turbulent time for participants. Conversations will be held about how stress levels can be higher at work and in their home environments.

Facilitator will introduce the concept of self-care and provide operational definitions of what that is.

Facilitator will conduct a group activity which highlights the variety of roles parents play. Answers should include: mother, sister, teacher, or father, uncle, carpenter, ect. Facilitator will highlight the importance of self-care and will identify possible drawbacks when self-care is overlooked. Facilitator will provide participants with a list of free ways they could incorporate self-care into their day-to-day life. Suggestions include: walking, meditation, exercise, and appropriate physical release.

Facilitator will introduce the final activity which is related to self-care. Participants will be provided a worksheet designed to identify existing supports in their personal networks. This will also provide an opportunity to identify ways they can address their physical emotional and mental well-being. This will be a personal document they will not be asked to share with others.

Concluding Activity

Facilitator will introduce the concluding activity called the Commitment Tree. Facilitator will call attention to a tree drawn in the classroom with branches without leaves. Participants will be asked to write down and identify at least two things or activities they are willing to commit to incorporating into their self-care plan. Facilitator will re-emphasize in order for the children to be at their best, caregivers need to take care of themselves. Participants will be asked to present their two items and call them out loud as they place them on the branches. At the conclusion of this exercise the tree will be populated with suggestions which will give the appearance of a healthy tree. Facilitator will take a picture of the tree and will send each participant their commitment leaves via mail within the next 30 days as a reminder of their pledged commitment. This exercise will reinforce transfer of learning concepts and will provide a visual reminder of the work they've done.

Trainer will begin to wrap up by thanking the group for their participation. Acknowledge the fact for many of them this was mandatory and applaud them for their willingness to be present during the training. They will be reminded even although kids are young there is still lots of things we can learn from them. Facilitator will show one remaining video entitled **“20 Things People Should Say More Often”** (<https://youtu.be/m5yCOSHeYn4>).

Once completed, facilitator will leave time for closing remarks and comments. Evaluations will be distributed and once completed the group will formally end.

The Stallworth Counseling team has made numerous contributions to the field of Parent Education. For example Marcus Stallworth, LMSW authored journal articles published in 23rd and 25th volumes Child Welfare League of America's Children's Voice and co-authored the acclaimed Supervision for Success training curriculum. Marcus also serves as a national consultant, trainer, and independent contractor for the Child Welfare League of America providing support for the 14-Step Module of Practice currently utilized in 26 states and in 13 countries. He is also a Social Services Consultant for Easter Seals' Children Academy and holds a Leadership position on Connecticut's Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (F.E.L.T). Marcus is an adjunct professor at University of Bridgeport in CT and is on the Board of Directors for the Mass Communication Department at Post University. He also plays an active role at the Legislative level advocating for strengthened media literacy education for CT children.