



Co-Parenting Works!

Helping Your Children Thrive after Divorce

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Sample Chapter: Introduction

Introduction: Finding Your Heart in Love and War

Any Christmas Eve at 6:00 p.m. during Leslie's childhood: sitting in the back seat of her mom's car in the parking lot of the 7-11, weeping in grief and frustration to the sound of her parents' enraged shouts at each other outside the car. Police sirens. Flashing red-and-blue lights. The sound of a policeman trying to calm her parents down, telling them he doesn't want to run them in on Christmas Eve, but if they don't stop disturbing the peace—

What peace?

Leslie would clutch her favorite teddy bear to her face, trying to shut it all out, make it go away ...

Leslie's parents, though they divorced when she was a baby, continued their personal war all through her growing-up years. When she looks back at childhood, the painful memories surface first: the arguing, the fighting over child support and who would pay for summer camp, the guilt trips each laid on her

about spending too much time with the other parent, the heartache of driving away with her father while her mother wept because she was going to spend a holiday away.

Christmas was split down the middle at 6:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, the handoff time to whichever parent had Leslie for Christmas Day that year. Parking lots were the neutral handoff spot where pillows, suitcases, teddy bears, and one very nervous little girl would be transferred from one car to another. Her parents couldn't manage even that much without taking the opportunity to vent their rage at each other. The sad truth is that the two people Leslie loved the most were good at only one thing—putting her in the middle and trying to make her choose who she loved the most. And because of that, Leslie's memories of childhood are memories of pain and crisis, chaos and confusion, anger and resentment.

Did Leslie's parents want to inflict pain and chaos and frustration on her life? Of course not—they loved her just as she loved them. Why then did they make her childhood so unpleasant?

I believe they didn't know how to handle the situation any better. They had no constructive and productive models for being the divorced co-parents of a sensitive and trusting child. How I wish someone had given them a road map to co-parenting—to working together, even though they were divorced, out of mutual love for the child they had brought into the world. How I wish someone could have helped them anticipate the monumental moments of Leslie's life—graduations, recitals, prom—so they could have all enjoyed those occasions together instead of trying to avoid the countless emotional landmines. How I wish a book or seminar had been available to help them figure out how to communicate with each other, difficult though it may have sometimes been, in the effort to help their little girl thrive. How I wish someone had explained to them that it's not about tearing down the other parent—it's about building up the child.

This book is that road map. These stories are the directional signs. The mistakes and successes of others are the guardrails for the next generation of co-parents to follow.

As a parent who has now been co-parenting for nine years—and as someone who, like Leslie, grew up under divorced, warring parents—I have found it is possible to move beyond anger and pain to a positive and cooperative attitude in co-parenting. It is possible to work together, for the sake of the child. It is possible to agree to disagree and to shield children from the ongoing hurts caused by divorce. Your child does not have to be another negative statistic. Your child can thrive, excel, adjust, and live life fully—in mom’s house, and also in dad’s.

Is co-parenting after divorce easy? No. Does positive co-parenting come naturally? No. Is it hard work that requires intentional effort from both parties? Oh, yes.

Is co-parenting critical for the sake and safety of your children? Absolutely. Can healthy co-parenting break the cycle of divorce and promote marriage and family in the future? Yes.

Are your kids worth the effort? You decide.

For years I have been hosting seminars that teach the principles and techniques of co-parenting. Do those principles work? Here are a few comments from people who’ve taken my co-parenting seminars:

“I don’t want to pass the torch of brokenness to my kids. I sensed hope for them.”

“I learned that my son needs to celebrate his dad, too. I can’t be both parents.”

“I realized I am doing many things right, but I learned 100 more ideas I never knew to do!”

“I want to be a stable parent and this seminar showed me I am being insecure and childish. I need to get healthy so I can be a better model to my daughter.

“I did not know how much damage I was doing when I talked bad about their dad.”

“Immediately after the co-parenting seminar I went to my son’s soccer game. For the first time in six years, I sat on the same side of the field as my ex-wife. I realized that part of co-parenting is getting out of my own comfort zone so my son won’t feel so divided. He came off the field and was able to high-five us both instead of having to choose which parent to go see first. I had no idea how much that was hurting him all those years. I have to admit, I was uncomfortable sitting on the same side as my ex but I had to remember—it’s not about me, it’s about my son!”

“After hearing about the importance of photos I asked my ex-husband if I could take a photo of him and our two children. I went to Walgreen’s and printed out one copy for my son’s room and one for my daughter’s room. They each now have an area in their rooms to put important things that remind them of their dad. I am doing that for their good, so the holes in their hearts will be much smaller in the future.”

I have seen lives changed by those seminars. I have seen families, even though they were no longer intact families, regain wholeness and health, so that the children of divorce could thrive.

The principles and techniques from that seminar are distilled into this book. The information and advice you need to navigate the co-parenting path, and do it well, is here, in your hands. You will hear the comments of co-parents about their obstacles and their efforts to find solutions. You will hear from adult children of divorce about what their parents did right—and what they wish their parents had done differently. You will also hear from young children currently being raised between two homes—and you will learn from their hurts and their happiness.

Friends, with strength and with a focus on your children’s heart, you too can become an amazing co-parenting team with your former spouse—even when stepparents come into the picture. I know that you love your children, or you

wouldn't have picked up this book. Let that love motivate you to do whatever it takes to facilitate a healthy childhood for your children. Determine to focus fully on what is best for your children's future. Be the one who leads the way with quiet strength that is more concerned about your children's heart and your children's future than about who is to blame for the past.

Your children were given to you on purpose! Out of the millions of parents on the planet, God gave them to you. And when he did, he presented you with an amazing job. Your influence on your children now is forming a family legacy that will live on long after you are gone. What will your kids say as they reflect on their childhood? Will they remember smiles and high fives at their athletic events—or unspoken hostility and cold wars? Will they remember destructive anger—or that you chose peace? Will they remember a happy good-bye at their handoff time to the other parent, or will they remember tears, insecurity, and sadness?

The answers to those questions lie in the choices that you make and in the way you and your ex conduct yourselves as co-parents.

Your ability to co-parent well is the most critical aspect of life after divorce for your children. It is the foundation to all of the details lived out in your everyday lives. Having lived it for several years now, I know firsthand that co-parenting is not easy; but I also know that it is worth every ounce of effort—because it is through that effort that our children can have the healthiest foundation on which to build their futures.

All right, let's get out of the locker room and onto the practice field...