Deciding It Is Over: The Initial Stages

The first step in implementing a positive parenting approach is recognizing the relationship is over. This may not be a single event but sometimes an ongoing process. When you focus on it as an event, it's natural to want to gain control over it. But viewing it as an ongoing process, however, permits a broader perspective and greater flexibility. It is also important to remember that no two separations are alike. People enter and move through the various stages differently, and personal experiences will vary. While some general signposts are clear enough, there are no exact guidelines to describe each and every separation or to prescribe how individuals should deal with various situations and issues.

Whether your breakup is a divorce or the end of a committed relationship, the feelings of sadness and hurt are similar. For divorce, the initial stage occurs when one or both spouses decide that the marriage is over. Sometimes divorce is preceded by a physical separation, in which one spouse moves out of the family home. In other cases, parents live together until the divorce is final.

At some point, however, parents are faced with the task of establishing two separate households. Sometimes when both parents agree the romantic relationship is over, this next step can bring about a sense of relief—especially if the home environment was tense, stressful, or filled with the pain of continued arguments. Sometimes parents' best efforts to work on their relationship can actually create more stress. Parents often report noticing their children experiencing some emotional relief during the initial stages of the separation. If you notice signs of distress in your child or children, listen to their concerns, take them seriously, and remember that as they grow more familiar with having two homes, they should begin to feel better.

Alternatives to Divorce and Separation

Many parents taking this course may not be married and going through a divorce, but for those that are, below are some alternative options to consider.

Structured Separation

One alternative to divorce is for a couple to transition away from their relationship through a structured separation. Such a separation simply involves living in separate physical locations. In general, separation typically does not impact family finances or the distribution of material property. Often times people think that a separation is just the beginning of the end. That is not necessarily the case. Sometimes time apart can be the best thing. It also gives couples the opportunity to see if they can financially and emotionally support a more long-term or permanent separation.

Couples can put together a structured separation agreement that outlines the terms of spending time with children, handling finances as well as any other issues that may arise.

With such a separation, your marriage stays intact however you are not permitted to remarry until you are legally separated or divorced.

Conscious Uncoupling

Conscious uncoupling is a relatively new term used in those instances where couples are focused on avoiding conflict and transitioning away from one another in the most peaceful way possible. The process, which may or may not take place with the help of a trained professional therapist, involves working through the transition with a spirit of collaboration, cooperation and a mutual respect and appreciation for the needs of one another.

Conscious uncoupling is an attempt to provide a new narrative for couples in transition, away from the traditions of divorce that tend to focus on separation, conflict and disconnection. Ultimately, it aims to minimize emotional fallout for the partners and their children, setting all involved on the path to future success.

Discernment Counseling

If one spouse is not sure they want to stay married AND doubts that couple's therapy can help, then Discernment Counseling is exactly where the couple belongs. The leaning-out partner is supported where they are emotionally, and the leaning-in spouse is equally supported in their own emotional state, Discernment counseling avoids starting half-hearted couple's therapy with these mixed-agenda couples. It accepts ambivalence rather than trying to work around it or overcome it.

Intensive Couples Therapy

Many couples attend couple's therapy with little or no success. They can be several factors contributing to this. Additionally, many couples reach out for help when things have become so dire that traditional hourly couple's therapy is ineffective. However, there are places where you can do an intensive couple's retreat either remotely or in person. Couples retreats are affective because you immerse yourself into the process of repairing your relationship without interruption. Couples therapy retreats are typically 3-4 days long and can be extremely helpful in rescuing a distressed relationship from ending. Even if a couple ends up transitioning out of the relationship, if they participated in an intensive process, they usually do this in a much more loving and collaborative way.

Annulment

In an annulment, the marriage is treated as if it never happened and generally can't claim for spousal support. There are two forms; a civil annulment and a religious annulment and both are hard to get granted. The civil annulment is usually granted for spouses who failed

to disclose a prior felony or concealed a cognitive impairment. A religious annulment is used to enable one or both partners to be remarried within their faith.

Mediation

Mediation is a common alternative couple's use to keep their legal fees under control. A neutral party is used to help both individuals reach an agreement regarding the terms of their separation. The time it takes will depend heavily on the details of your case and how quickly you and your co-parent want to move forward.

Should we use a Mediator?

While many people still opt to retain their own attorneys, more and more couples are looking for alternatives to the traditional adversarial divorce. Today, many couples consult family mediators to assist with sensitive child-sharing and custody arrangements. Mediation is the process of finding a mutually acceptable settlement to the disputed issues in the divorce. It is a cooperative method whereas hiring separate attorneys often sets off an adversarial process. Mediators are individuals who have specialized training in conflict resolution, and they can either be court appointed or retained directly by divorcing spouses.

The mediator's job is to help couples resolve their various logistical sticking points without getting bogged down in personal conflict. In a safe, non-threatening environment, an effective mediator will help identify important issues, consider both parents' perspective and opinions, and ease conflict around differences or painful topics. When parents begin old patterns of arguing and disagreeing, a skilled mediator will keep the focus on the issues at hand and remind parents that attacking one another is not helpful to the mediation process, nor to the health and well-being of their children. According to a recent CBS news story, 95% of all divorces filed never go to trial but are settled beforehand. Therefore, if you can work from a reasonable balance of power and compromise, it makes sense to work out your settlement together with a skilled negotiator, rather than under pressure from the court.

Stages of Mediation

Mediation is a multi-stage process designed to get results. It is less formal than a trial or arbitration, but there are distinct stages to the mediation process that account for the system's high rate of success.

Stage 1: Mediator's opening statement. The mediator introduces everyone, explains the goals and rules and encourages each side to work cooperatively toward a settlement.

Stage 2: Disputants' opening statements. Each party is invited to describe the dispute and its consequences. When one person is speaking, the other is not allowed to interrupt.

Stage 3: Joint discussion. Some parties may respond directly to the opening statements in an attempt to further define the issues.

Stage 4: Private caucuses. The private caucus is a chance for each party to meet privately with the mediator in separate rooms. The mediator will go between the two rooms to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each position and to exchange offers. These private meetings are crucial in the mediation.

Stage 5: Joint negotiation. After caucuses, the mediator might bring the parties back together to negotiate directly, but this doesn't usually happen until a settlement is reached or the time allotted for the mediation ends.

Stage 6: Closure. If the parties reach an agreement, the mediator will likely put its main provisions in writing and ask each side to sign the written summary of the agreement. If the parties didn't reach an agreement, the mediator will help the parties determine whether it would be fruitful to meet again later or continue negotiations by phone.

The Next Chapter

For many families, separating and establishing two households can be emotionally painful, especially if one or both parents do not want to separate. Positive parenting requires that parents take care of their own needs as they are caring for their children. Because parents who can successfully deal with their own emotional issues during this time are much better equipped to help their children, they should take time to work on the painful emotions that separating can engender. Those emotions may initially include fear, worry, anger, and frustration, to name just a few. Parents who do not have constructive outlets for their own emotions are more likely to express them in ways harmful to themselves and their children. Finding ways to discuss your feelings, get objective feedback, and receive encouragement can help you make balanced and healthy decisions for your kids.

Similarly, parents and children both suffer when parents' negative feelings lead them to treat each other poorly. Parents should strive to treat one another with respect. Since conflict is a normal part of life, it would be unrealistic not to anticipate disagreements. However, parents should actively engage in working out conflicts as long as it is done in a safe context for both of them, and as long as children are not present for escalating arguments. Positive parents make this one of their most important priorities at this stage of the process.

Most children, regardless of their age, either know or intuit that their parents are having difficulties. Still, it is important to limit their exposure to excessive arguing. Adults who experienced their parents fighting as young children often note excessive parent conflict as the most problematic aspect of their parents' break-up. Parental arguments in the children's presence usually leave the children feeling caught in the middle. Parents can minimize this hazard by making deliberate efforts to keep their conflicts away from the kids and by

resisting the temptation to communicate with one another through the children. Children learn as much from their parents' break-up as from observing their relationship. Parents can help make those lessons positive ones by maintaining respectful and caring relationships with one another. When we speak about caring for your ex, we mean caring for your children's sake, not a romantic type of caring.

What is the Best Way to Discuss the Separation with Our Children?

A positive parenting approach focuses on communicating with your children in age-appropriate ways. Most experts agree that both parents together should speak with their children about the decision to separate. It is certainly OK for children to see that parents are struggling emotionally. They must also see their parents successfully manage those difficult emotions. If one or both parents prefer or feel obligated to discuss the relationship ending separately, be honest with your children about what is happening, but speak in neutral terms.

Be sure not to assign blame to the other parent. As common-sense as this advice is, it is a very common trap for parents to fall into. In addition, let children know that they are not to blame for the divorce. Be prepared for a wide range of reactions, and make room for whatever responses they have. Do not necessarily expect their initial reaction to be permanent. Remember also, that most children ask a lot of the same questions repeatedly. This is a normal way of gaining a sense of security about their future. Try to curb your frustration and answer them lovingly and consistently.

Let children know often that both parents will always love them and that you will always be a family. The difference will be that Mom and Dad are living in separate homes. Remind your children that you will always support them in having relationships with both parents. Let them know that you are parents forever, and that they will never be abandoned. Remember that for younger children (between the ages of three and seven), short, clear explanations are best. For older kids, lengthier explanations may be appropriate, but be careful not to over-explain. Children will often perceive added details as a move toward getting them to take sides. It is important to remember here that your child's understanding will continually evolve with time. As children experience more of life, their ideas about relationships in general can change dramatically.

You should stress to your children that the separation is occurring because of differences between Mom and Dad. Always refrain from speaking badly about the other parent. To accomplish this, you must have other outlets to deal with difficult feelings regarding the other parent. You will ensure a quicker, healthier, adjustment when you are able to respect and care for the other parent despite difficult feelings. Being able to do this will also aid in your own ability to move on and be happy.

Positive Parenting, at this early stage, requires parents to balance stability and change. You should make every effort to keep stability in your child's life while recognizing that transitions such as this is an opportunity for children to learn and accept change as a part of

life. We can't always predict or choose when our children will get to learn certain life lessons. However, we can look for and embrace such opportunities when they arise.

How Do We Make Decisions as Parents Once We Live in Separate Households?

Co-parenting is the term used to describe the process of parents working together to meet the needs of their children. Co-parenting responsibilities apply to all people, whether they are single, married, divorced, adoptive, grandparent, guardian, or foster care, who are entrusted with the responsibility to care for children. Co-parenting, however, almost always takes more work, communication, and lifelong commitment than most people initially expect. Parents who understand the importance of co-parenting and learn effective co-parenting strategies greatly assist their children through the changes associated with separation and divorce. Whenever possible, both parents should be involved in the decisions that keep children safe, healthy, and thriving. Many parents, because of difficulties beyond their control, will be faced with making the majority of decisions themselves. For some, this is a relief because having the other parent's input would be more stressful. For other parents, this can be a source of stress because they are going it alone.

Some of the more important decisions parents should make together involve children's living location and arrangements, education, religion, discipline, medical treatment, finances, and emergencies, to name a few. Even parents who are happily married have different ideas about some or all of these issues. This is normal. It would be unrealistic to assume that divorced parents share the same ideas about all of these important issues either. Of utmost importance is how well you deal with differences when they arise. Do you get into a power struggle that you feel you must win? Are you willing to compromise? Are you willing to choose your battles? Are you willing to agree to disagree? Few parents are able to integrate these strategies when a separation or divorce is new. However, in time and with practice, they can become second nature. Let's take a close look at each of these below.

Power struggles are very common in relationships. Often, couples will continue a power struggle years after the court decision is final. The first step toward eliminating power struggles is awareness. Some parents experience this as, 'When I say 'up,' he says 'down'; 'when I say 'black,' she says 'white.'' When you identify this kind of pattern, at first just observe it in action. This observing can lead you to some very interesting and creative strategies for interrupting the escalating cycle.

Compromise is another essential tool for the positive parent. It means being willing to set aside some of your tightly held beliefs about your children and what is best for them. This is easier said than done. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for compromise to be contagious. Often, when one person begins to compromise, (especially in a relationship previously defined by power struggles), the other person begins to follow suit. Parents often ask how long they should compromise in the face of the parent who refuses to meet in the middle. Many parents in this situation justifiably continue to compromise, as the best way to address their children's best interests. Other parents find it necessary to stand up to the

other parent and demand some concessions. You have to take what you know about your co-parent and the specific issue in question, and make the best decision for your family.

Most parents learn early on that child rearing requires you to choose your battles. You can't get upset at everything that goes wrong, or you will be upset most of the day. Similarly, focusing too much on the differences in parenting styles will be frustrating. Choosing your battles means identifying your priorities and reserving your passion for discussing these issues. For example, if you consider school a priority, you should discuss school-related concerns and challenges with the other parent. Consistent nightly bedtimes might be important to you, something you enforce in your home. However, avoiding this issue–especially when your co-parent has different ideas about bedtime–is a good idea.

Cultivating an atmosphere of cooperation is more important than agreement on any one issue. Usually, when emotions cool, and parents can be more objective, issues can be discussed in a more cooperative way. It is important to provide your co-parent with some flexibility and room to be a parent. Whenever possible, look for opportunities to compliment your co-parent on their parenting abilities. Start small and build on whatever is working well. This can help defuse stressful situations and lay the groundwork for future cooperation.

On the other hand, constant arguing among parents creates stress for everyone. Parents fighting to be right or to get their own way puts children in the middle, fostering angry feelings and difficulties in their own intimate relationships later in life. Relating maturely and with a healthy sense of respect for one another is simple but not easy. Your challenge as a divorcing parent is to help create a context where your children learn about love, life, change, and family relationships.

The Importance for Children to Have a Safe and Predictable Relationship with Both Parents, and How do I Accomplish This?

Children, like adults but even more so, thrive on structure and stability. When our lives are stable we feel secure, and this security helps us feel good about ourselves. During this time of transition, parents can minimize the stress of these changes by planning ahead and involving children (in age-appropriate ways) with what is going on. Some changes children might experience include moving, changing schools, variations to normal routines, spending time with parents separately, making new friends, and adjusting to different schedules. The more areas you can keep stable, the better–especially sources of support like family, friends, and school.

When changes are inevitable, you'll want to discuss them with your children ahead of time. This will help reduce their stress levels. However, it would be unrealistic to think that a family can experience a divorce without any changes. Remember that learning about transitions in life is not a bad thing, and your child can learn valuable life lessons in adjusting to change. Take the opportunity to teach your children about change, and even share with them your own struggles. It cannot be overstated that the more parents are

comfortable with and accepting of the changes they are facing, the more comfortable and accepting their children will be.

Keep in mind that it will take time to adjust to new schedules and routines. This adjustment period can last for several months. Do your best to anticipate this transition period, and make room for it. But don't worry; eventually your routine will begin to feel normal. You should also consider that each child will respond differently to the changes associated with a divorce. It is not uncommon for one child to be doing better than another initially. At some point, the reverse may be true. This is normal, and you should accept and acknowledge whatever reaction your child is experiencing in the present.

Keys to Creating a Healthy and Stable Home Environment

- Provide structure and routine in your child's day.
- Communicate with children about impending changes.
- Balance the changes associated with divorce with your child's need for stability.
- Provide children with age-appropriate consequences when rules are broken.
- Do not speak to your co-parent through your children.
- When dealing with your co-parent, remember to compromise and choose your battles carefully.
- Refrain from arguing and excessive conflict in front of your children.
- Be your co-parent's biggest supporter (when it comes to your kids).
- Do not burden children with adult responsibilities.
- Take care of your own needs so you can be there for your kids.
- Encourage children to speak about their feelings but don't make it mandatory.
- Read books about parenting after divorce and moving on.

Understanding What Your Child May Be Experiencing

As we discussed, deciding it is over is rarely viewed as a single event. The process can be divided into three stages, each with specific implications for your children's health.

The first stage is the immediate crisis stage, which usually lasts two months to a year. For many children, this is a time of shock and disbelief. Even when parental conflict has been high, most children are surprised and often saddened their parents are breaking up. Their sense of stability, and their belief that their family will always be together, is altered. Conflict between parents is perhaps the most serious stressor during this phase. At this early stage, parents may spend less time with their children and be less sensitive to their children's needs. In most crisis situations, parents instinctively protect their children; but in this stage, parents are frequently preoccupied with their own issues and concerns. This is difficult for children, who often feel the most needy, sad, and anxious during this time.

In the short-term aftermath stage, which can last up to two years, the turmoil and shock of the first stage gives way to a deepening recognition of the realities of having two homes.

Conflict and hostility between parents can be serious sources of stress for children. Older children are frequently used by their parents as allies, pawns, or go-betweens. Many parents, even without meaning to, burden their children with private, adult aspects of the divorce.

Some parents allow children to sleep in the parent's bed during this phase. Sleeping alone is a developmental achievement for children, and they acquire a firmer sense of independence, autonomy, and competence by being able to manage this type of separation from parents. Allowing younger children to sleep in a parent's bed on a short-term basis for comforting purposes is not necessarily harmful, but moving back to their own bed as soon as possible is usually advised.

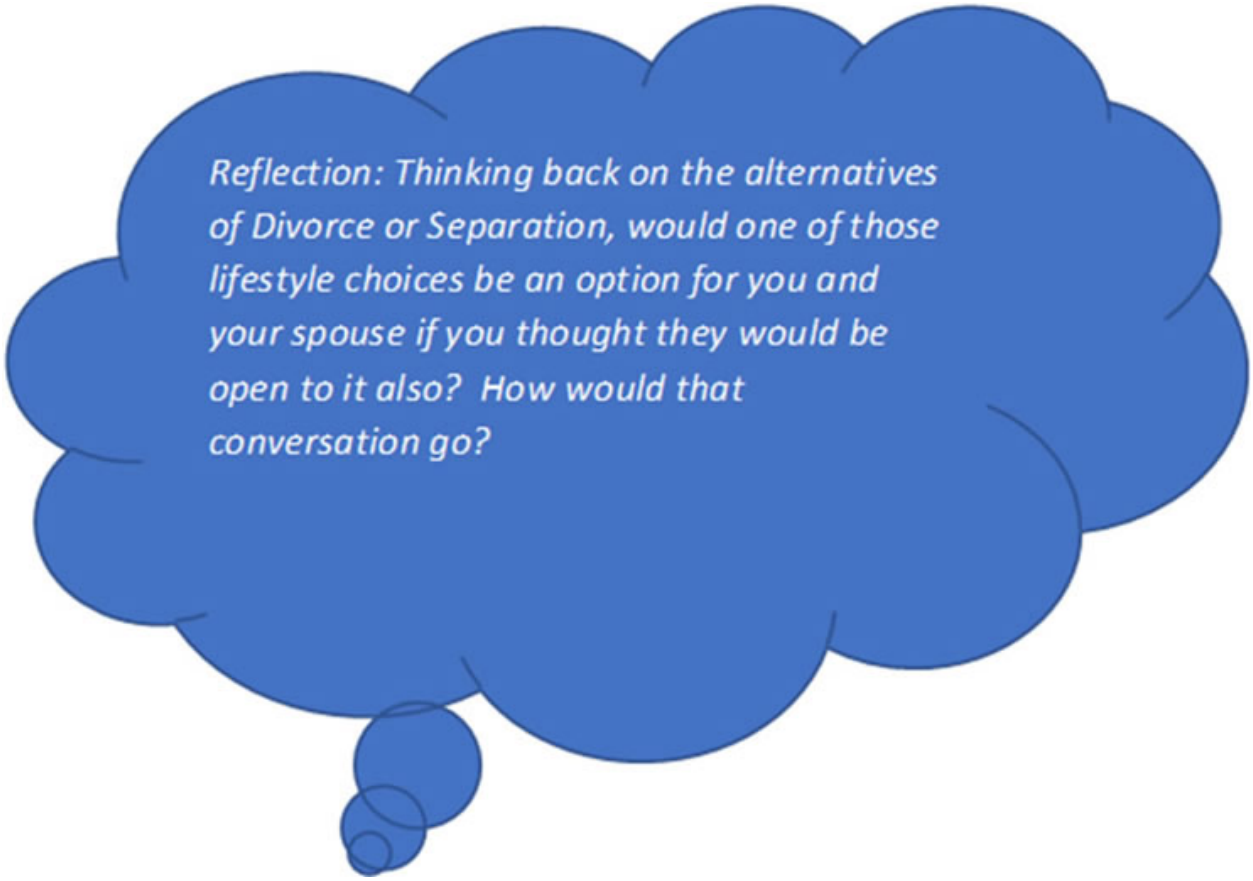
The last stage is considered the long-range period. This may begin anywhere from two to three years after the initial separation and may be prolonged due to unresolved custody or financial battles. Many parents remarry during this stage, sometimes leading children to feel displaced. Also, children who get along well with a stepparent may struggle with feelings of disloyalty toward their biological mother or father. Talk your children about these feelings, and in time, their discomfort should ease.

Book Resources:

Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs by Phillip Michael Stahl

BIFF for Co-Parent Communication: Your Guide to Difficult Texts, Emails, and Social Media Posts, by Bill Eddy, Annette Burns, et al.

So, What's Your Proposal?: Shifting High-Conflict People from Blaming to Problem-Solving in 30 Seconds! by Bill Eddy, LSCW, Esq.



Case Study

Casey (42) and Pat (41) were together for five years before their relationship ended. Casey had been previously married, and had three children with a former spouse. During the time they were together, the children began to identify with Pat as their other parent. Their biological mother disappeared almost entirely from the picture and so she played little part in their lives.

Pat had no children prior to the marriage, and Casey was adamant that three was enough. During their relationship, this did not present a major problem as Pat simply behaved as the other parent to the children. The arrangement made perfect sense at the time and so long as things were good between the parents, things remained good for the children.

However, things changed drastically when the couple split up. Since Pat was not the birth-mother of Casey's children, it put their family in a unique situation in terms of access. Fortunately, Casey was a wise, and knew that Pat had become an integral part of their children's lives and did not want to keep them apart.

This presented many problems for them, but they were determined to overcome the issues in order to have a better life for their children. That is why they decided to attend a few sessions of counseling. We discussed each of their needs at length. What emerged from

the conversation was a plan to keep Pat in contact with the children without both parties having to bump heads over unrelated issues. Though Casey had some initial resentments, the realization that happened in counseling was that Pat was serious about wanting to be part of the children's lives and did not have any hidden agendas.

As the separation was being finalized, the couple continued to participate in counseling. I knew that a major issue was to make sure the children were OK with the concept of living in two homes. I focused on dialogue concerning that situation at first, and over time this allowed Casey and Pat to open up about wider concerns about the future of the children.

With time they both recognized their mutual desire to do well by the kids, and realized that this was more important than their differences. I suggested they make some attempts to talk with the kids about some impending changes. Just the fact that they were united in presenting these changes would be beneficial. This would reassure the children that things would be different in some ways, but that the fundamentals would remain the same; their parents would still love them unconditionally, and they would be cared for.

I then brought up the idea of co-parenting, reminding them that this term means different things to different people. What was important was that the definition of co-parenting, make sense to both of them. Both Casey and Pat agreed on some boundaries for the co-parenting process and proceeded to find ways to move forward without disrupting the lives of the children.

Within several months, they had developed an effective system for sharing the responsibilities between them, and they were able to minimize disruption to anyone's lives. This was the optimal outcome, but it is never out of reach when one has two loving parents to deal with. These days Pat and Casey are doing a wonderful job of raising Karen (12), Maria (14), and Robert (16). I was impressed in how much they loved the children and were committed to making positive changes to their lives.

Please click on the link below for a printable copy of this chapter.