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Parenting on Your Own : Sharing Parenting Responsibilities

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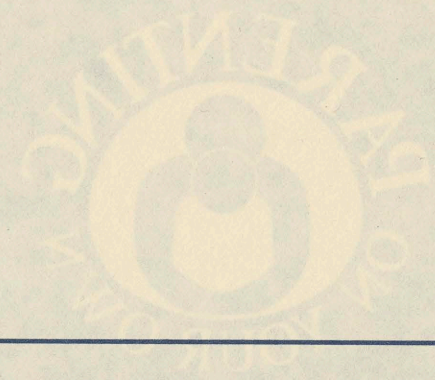
SHARING PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

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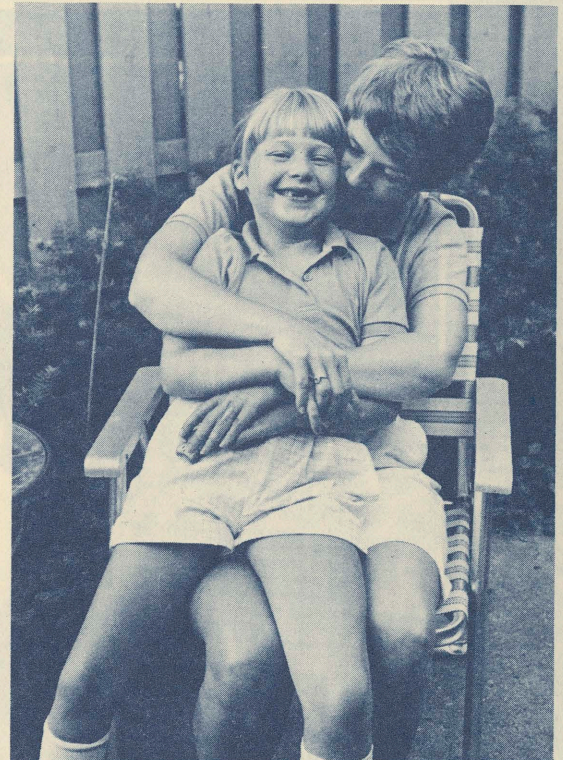
Your feelings and experiences as a parent may be different now that you are divorced. You may find yourself wondering how you and your former spouse should share parenting, or you may find yourself disagreeing about parenting with your ex-spouse. These feelings and experiences are very common.

While we can only speculate how each family will work out its parenting responsibilities, it is safe to say that in most families parenting will change. Change, of course, does not signal that bad things will happen. Some positive changes will occur, too. This circular discusses some ways by which you can work out parenting responsibilities.

Why Share Parenting?

You may be asking yourself, "Why bother with trying to share parenting responsibilities?" Or, "Isn't it better if only one parent handles the kids?" The decisions you make about shared parenting are an individual matter, but much of the current evidence indicates that *children's adjustment is related to the quality of their relationship with both parents.*

Though there are some exceptions, most children make healthy adjustments when they continue relationships with both parents. Also, children usually wish to stay in touch with both parents and are dissatisfied with infrequent contact. This desire for contact seems to be truer of young children than adolescents. Adolescents are more likely to be seeking some independence and, therefore, may be somewhat less influenced by the lack of contact. However, this does not mean that most adolescents do not care to continue a relationship with both parents.



In some instances, shared parenting may not be best for the children. In cases where one parent is abusive or has psychological problems, continued contact may have negative effects on the children. In these situations shared parenting would not be desirable.

While each family is unique, the evidence indicates that most children can benefit from continued relationships with both parents. As you consider your own family situation, the following sections may help identify some ways to share parenting responsibilities.

New Family Roles

The role of parent and spouse usually go together. In fact the two activities of being mother and wife or father and husband may not have been thought of as separate roles. With divorce, this changes. While the role of spouse ends, the role of parent continues. There is continuity, but there is also change. For most divorced parents, it will take some time to sort out exactly what it means to be a parent without being a spouse.



"Each of my kids reacts differently to making the transition from one house to the other. My daughter takes it pretty well if she just has some time and space to herself. My son has a harder time. For the first few weeks he won't let me out of his sight and he has lots of questions."

Perhaps many ideas about what a family is don't fit anymore. For many, there may be a sense of having lost their family and its life style. You may not realize you're starting a new, somewhat different family.

For the noncustodial parent, the sense of loss of a family life can be even greater. The occasional visits may transform the role of parent into that of visitor. The role of "weekend parent" may be dramatically different and difficult to understand and manage.

At first, you may struggle for new ways of thinking about yourself as a parent. In part, this involves defining some new goals for yourself and your children. You may ask, "What do I hope to accomplish with my children?" and "What do I want to do as a parent?"

One difficulty may be the absence of any other role models, that is, other single parents who might serve as examples. Some people may find accounts of single parents in books useful or seek out single-parent groups to find people with com-

mon experiences. As you begin your new role, finding some real or fictional model of what you would like to be as a single parent may help to define the role.

Conflict With the Ex-spouse

Divorced parents often talk about continued conflict with the former spouse. It is rare for there to be no disagreements. These conflicts may be over past issues or present concerns related to the property or child-custody settlement. Visitation and financial support are often sources of arguments. It is in the interest of both parents and children to reduce these conflicts. Yet there are no easy solutions to the problem of stopping conflict.

Much of the single parent's difficulty is in managing the relationship. For the married parent, it makes sense to tell oneself, "We share this problem" or "We're in this together." But the single parent finds this a contradiction, a case of, "We

Resolving Conflict

Fair Fighting

Tactics for maintaining positive relationships

Emphasize mutual interests ("We both want to find a solution to this problem").

Enhance mutual power ("We can work together on this").

Define conflict as a mutual problem ("We are both concerned").

Adopt trusting, friendly orientation ("I know you will help out with this").

Respond helpfully to other's needs and requests ("Okay, I'll try to help out").

Seek common beliefs and attitudes ("What do we agree on?").

Emphasize common bonds and interests ("We share the same goal").

Unfair Fighting

Tactics for discouraging positive relationships

Emphasize antagonistic interests ("You and I don't have the same goals").

Enhance power differences ("I always have to find the solution").

Define conflict in win/lose terms ("You're just trying to get your way").

Adopt suspicious, hostile orientation ("You never contribute to the solution").

Exploit other's needs and weaknesses ("That just shows that you can't manage by yourself").

Seek opposing beliefs and attitudes ("We never agree on this").

Emphasize differences ("We just hold different values").

How to solve problems creatively

Limit the set of issues.

Limit to "here-and-now" issues.

Communicate fully, openly, and honestly.

Discuss numerous alternatives.

Use rational, persuasive arguments.

Refine issue into subparts.

Examine importance of each subpart.

Seek areas of agreement.

How not to solve problems

Tackle many issues at once.

Involve past and future issues.

Mislead, confuse each other. Discuss only one possible solution.

Use threats and attacks.

Address total issue all at once.

Assume equal importance of all subparts of an issue.

Emphasize areas of disagreement.



"While I haven't missed my ex-wife, there's not a day that goes by that I haven't missed my boy. . . . I've now been shut off from contact with him. I do feel like a parent. I have a child that I worry about very much."

are not in this together. I'm trying to end this relationship, but it hasn't ended."

While the marriage has ended, the joint responsibilities as parents have not ended. Thus, the dilemma — "We're not in this together, but yet we are." It is important to begin by separating the role of parent from spouse. Divorced parents are not in this situation together as husband and wife, but rather as father and mother with continued responsibilities for the healthy development of their children.

Some single parents may say, "My former spouse does not have a role as parent. He or she just visits and provides special treats." It is true that divorced parents vary in the amount of shared parenting, and often much of the conflict arises over what is and is not shared.

Shared Parenting

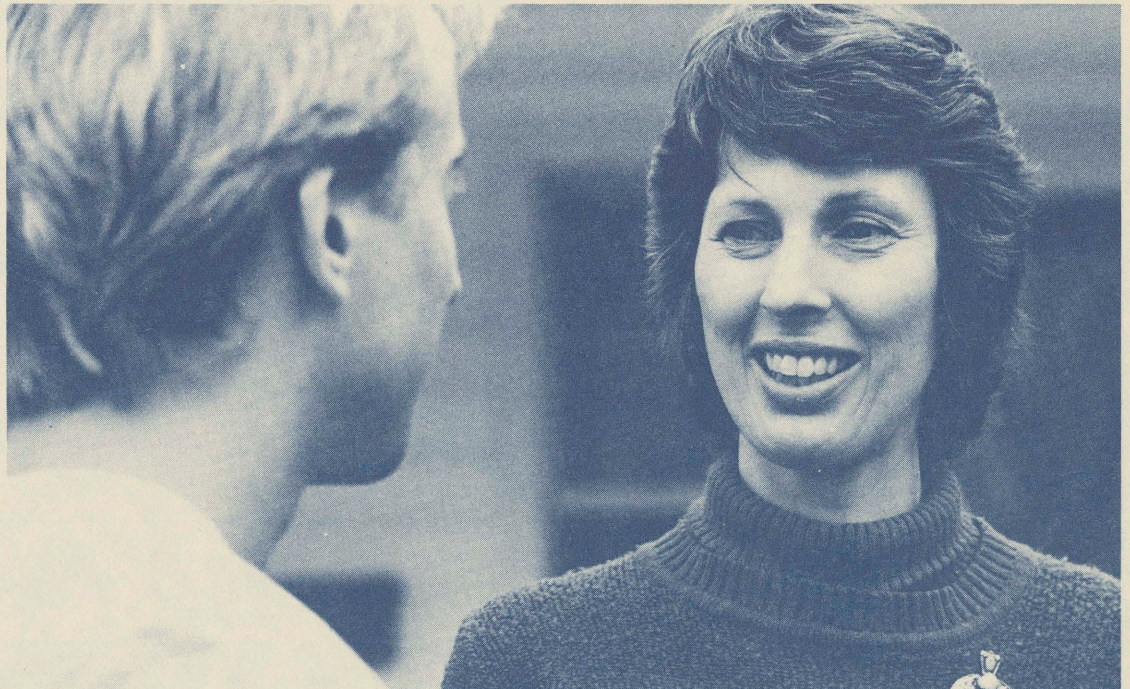
How do two parents arrive at an acceptable shared arrangement? Part of the answer is in agreeing on what aspects of parenting will be shared. For divorced or separated parents with joint custody, there may be a lot of shared responsibility. For other parents with sole custody,

there may be less joint responsibility.

Parents can discuss their roles as parents and attempt to define areas to share and areas in which one or the other has sole responsibility. You can use the "Shared Parenting Checklist" activity to begin defining the shared arrangements.

As you begin to try to further define your sole and shared responsibilities, it may be best to begin by looking for areas in which there is already some agreement. The divorce settlement may have resolved some aspects such as support or visitation. Talk about these issues. Discuss questions such as: What are each parent's expectations regarding the picking up and returning of the children? How do we make changes in these arrangements, if necessary? What about bed-times, child care, television, and so forth?

Some issues may be too complex to solve at once. Therefore, they may need to be divided up into manageable parts. For example, how discipline is to be administered involves many decisions and will change over time. Identifying and solving some aspects of an issue will be a base for resolving other areas of conflict.





"I'm not a custodial parent, but I'm an 'emotional' parent."

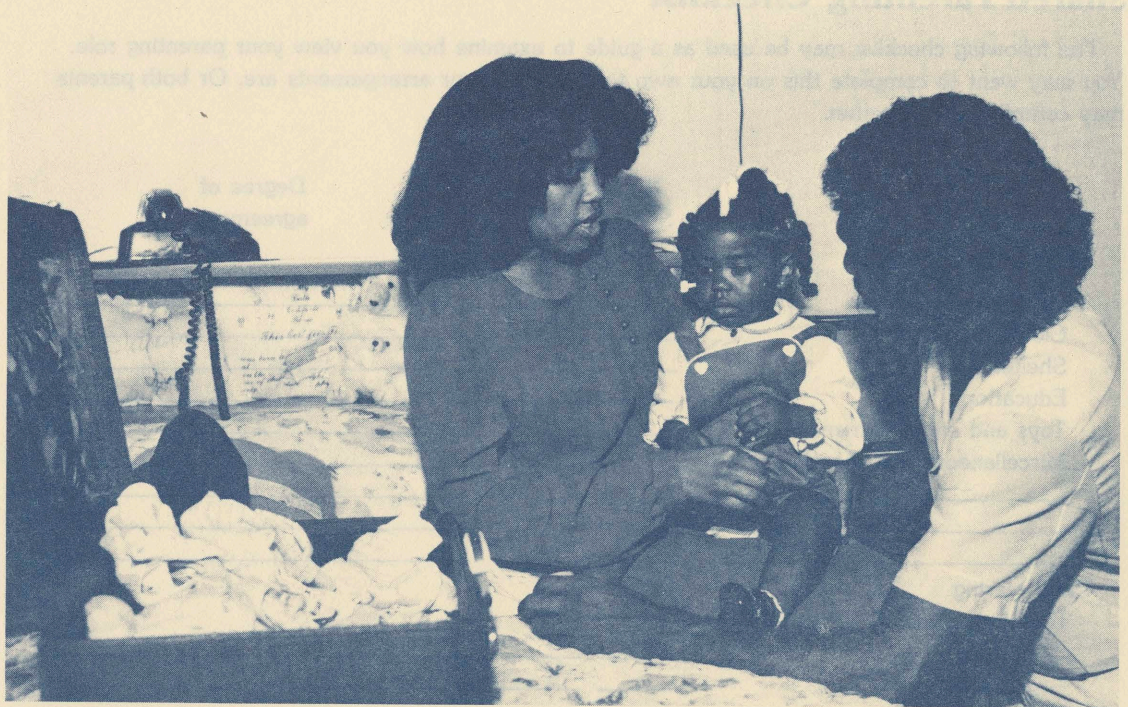
Shared Parenting Checklist

The following checklist may be used as a guide to examine how you view your parenting role. You may want to complete this on your own to see what your arrangements are. Or both parents may complete this together.

	Responsibility		Degree of agreement
	Shared	Sole	
Financial support			
Food	_____	_____	_____
Clothing	_____	_____	_____
Shelter	_____	_____	_____
Education	_____	_____	_____
Toys and entertainment	_____	_____	_____
Miscellaneous (list these)	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
Child rearing			
Decisions about			
clothing	_____	_____	_____
grooming	_____	_____	_____
friends	_____	_____	_____
overnight visits with friends	_____	_____	_____
dating	_____	_____	_____
bedtimes	_____	_____	_____
child care	_____	_____	_____
television	_____	_____	_____
religion	_____	_____	_____
morals, values	_____	_____	_____
education	_____	_____	_____
Discipline	_____	_____	_____
Handling behavior problems	_____	_____	_____
School and teacher contact	_____	_____	_____
Eating habits	_____	_____	_____
Diet, meals	_____	_____	_____
Allowances	_____	_____	_____
Health			
Doctor visits	_____	_____	_____
Dentist visits	_____	_____	_____
Medication	_____	_____	_____
Counseling	_____	_____	_____
Other			
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____



"I didn't share parenting at first because I was sort of distancing myself from my ex-husband, but now I encourage my kids to write letters, to send cards or make gifts for Father's Day. I think there are good reasons for them and for me. People will probably keep paying the child support if they stay involved and if they feel some control over their children's lives. It helps me to give that little extra. There's no question it helps them. They need that contact no matter what I think of him. He is their father, he cares about them, and there are a lot of things he can contribute."



Conflict Management

At the crux of shared parenting is conflict management. Regardless of whether the conflict is between spouses or former spouses, certain tactics in conflict situations often lead to solutions and others inflame the situation. When both parties try to solve the conflict rationally, it is likely to be resolved. When disagreements occur, give reasons for your viewpoint. This will often encourage each person to use reasoning to solve problems. If one parent thinks that the child should be in bed by a certain time and offers reasons — such as improved school performance and better overall behavior — this encourages the other parent to use reasons to explain another point of view. Mutual discussion of these reasons may lead to a solution more quickly.

On the other hand, personal attacks, threats, or the use of power during conflict will often cause the other person to use similar methods. Attacking one another verbally or using threats to try to change the child's bedtime will likely make the other person more determined to resist. Personal attacks often lead to counterattacks

that escalate the conflict. By refusing to enter into a battle, parents can attempt to return a discussion to the use of reasons and explanations. See "Resolving Conflict" for a further discussion of managing conflict.

Another means for minimizing conflict is through being sensitive to each other's emotions. This means trying to calm emotions that may have gotten stirred up in order to return to the real issues. *Knowing when to take a time-out to calm down is important.* Also, trying to understand each other's feelings about the issue can help keep the discussion focused.

Summary

Parenting together means assuming a new role in which parenting is separated from the former marriage relationship. The challenge is to develop the skill to resolve parenting issues while preventing other antagonisms from interfering. By finding areas of agreement in parenting and building on these, parents can find shared goals for their children and themselves.



“Sometimes you say ‘no’ to a child and your spouse says ‘yes’;
you’ve got to continually work that out.”

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The circuit was presented by Robert H. Fisher, Jr.,
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You've got to continually work that out."

For Further Reading

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This circular was prepared by Robert Hughes, Jr., Assistant Professor of Family Relations Extension. Acknowledgment is also given to the parents and children who enthusiastically shared their experiences through photographs and personal responses.

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