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Chapter 1

Understanding What Co-Parenting Means

Let me begin with an analogy designed to explain what co-parenting your children after a parental breakup truly means.

Imagine that you and your partner have been together for eight years. You have three children, aged 7, 5, and 4. You recently started a new job that requires your family to relocate. The stresses of starting a new job, moving, and having three young children have put a huge strain on your relationship, and you and your partner are considering breaking up. As a diversion from your troubles, you decide to take one last family vacation — a train trip over the mountains to the Grand Canyon.

At the time of this story, you're at one end of the train, and your partner is at the other. Your three children are sitting in the middle car, playing video games on their tablets. As the train rounds a turn, loose rocks fall onto the tracks, and the train derails. Alarms begin to sound. Your partner's end of the train pitches to one side, and it's difficult to get to one another. You can hear both your children calling for you. As more rocks begin to fall, the train pitches even more, and the kids tumble toward your partner's end of the train. The kids struggle to keep their footing, but they must be careful. Too much shaking might dislodge the train from the tracks and cause it to tumble down the hill.

I'll stop the story here for a second. Amid all this confusion, someone hands you a new script saying that you and your partner are no longer together. Your relationship ended a year and a half ago. Do you say, "Cool! Since we're no longer together, this train wreck is your problem!" Or, with your partner's help, do you figure out a way to save your kids? That, precisely, is the definition of co-parenting.

To further explain, whenever you see the prefix *co* in front of a word, it implies "together," "jointly," or possibly "in common." It indicates a partnership or collective action — something shared equally between individuals. Co-parenting isn't just a word. It's also a call to action, an urgent directive for estranged parents to put their own issues aside in the name of their children.

In this chapter, I introduce the concept behind true co-parenting and examine why it's so important for parents to create a calm and loving environment for their kids after a breakup. I begin by establishing the premise of co-parenting, which is, "Put your children first," and why that should always be the primary motivation when making decisions with your co-parent. I also examine how your breakup has affected your children and how co-parenting with C.A.R.E. minimizes their confusion.

Putting the Children First

If you asked me for a co-parenting mantra, a positive phrase or affirming statement that you can say to yourself for motivation or encouragement, I'd have to say, "Put the children first." This is the criterion on which to make all co-parenting decisions. If you find yourself looking for answers and aren't sure where to turn, using your children's well-being as your measure when faced with a major decision makes any choice easier.



REMEMBER

Forget about the principle of the thing when disagreeing with your co-parent and make your love for your children the principal thing.

Sure, it's a play on words, and something I tell co-parents all the time, but no truer words can be spoken. What's best for your children should be your guiding light, even if at times you must feel uncomfortable, admit you're wrong, swallow your pride, move, do without, or go slower in a new relationship than you want to. Once you have children, it's your job to put them before anything else.

Your children didn't ask for this breakup. If you've decided to turn your children's lives upside down, you should legitimately consider those children first. Putting your children first is a call to your higher self and should be all the motivation you need to adjust your co-parenting approach from combative to collaborative.

Examining Why Co-Parenting Is So Important

For those who had a nasty breakup, the thought of working with someone who has so infuriated them in the past may seem impossible. How ridiculous to believe that parents who couldn't get along when they were together could get along after their breakup.

But it's not so ridiculous. Since the mid-1980s, when joint custody was introduced, custody laws have required estranged parents to share their children's time after they break up. And considering the number of marriages that end in divorce, not to mention parents who have never married but no longer live together, that means a huge percentage of children now live in two homes: Mom's house and Dad's house. The anxiety this creates — anticipating a move every few days, living with different family members, different rules, sleeping in a different bed, even eating different foods — can be overwhelming, not only for the children, but for the parents who anticipate their children leaving again. It adds an undertone of desperation to everyone's life.

Not knowing exactly what to do, many parents just retreat to their corners, living separate lives and expecting their children to do the same. Even though countless studies have proven that children fare better when their parents take a cooperative approach to parenting them after a breakup, many don't take this knowledge to heart. They believe a breakup makes them autonomous, able to make decisions for their children on their own.

The reality is something completely different. Joint custody parenting plans force a child to live in two homes. The very nature of joint custody asks children to check their allegiance each time they leave one parent's home and go to the other's. It's natural for people to compare, so when children go back and forth between homes, they inwardly consider which bedroom they like best or which parent makes the best pizza. Children often compartmentalize their approach to cope with the back-and-forth. In my own bonus son's case, I found that the snacks he preferred at his mother's home weren't the snacks he preferred at mine. I was amused to hear that he ate fruit cocktail at his mother's home, while bean burritos were his preference at my house. When I bought fruit cocktail to eat at my house, he looked at me like I was crazy. "I don't eat fruit cocktail here." He'd compartmentalized his food choices. Fruit cocktail at Mom's. Bean burritos at Dad's.

But there's something even more important to consider. When parents are raising children under the same roof, cooperation while parenting is implied. If a child speaks disrespectfully, it's common for the other parent, or even another adult in the home, to step in and say, "Don't talk to your mother (father, Aunt Mary, and so on) like that!" That united front helps children learn boundaries and respect.

However, once parents separate, the incentive to support one another can quickly disappear. So, when a child is disrespectful post-divorce, it's easy for a parent to say something like, "I understand, honey. I used to hate it when he talked to me like that, too. Just ignore him." That kind of response sends the message that it's acceptable to disrespect the other parent. But, of course, it's not.



REMEMBER

Whether you're raising your child under the same roof or in separate households, the standard for respectful behavior should remain the same. Your child needs to see both parents supporting each other's roles, not undermining them.

Co-Parenting with C.A.R.E.

This is where co-parenting with C.A.R.E. comes in. C.A.R.E. is an acronym for communication, acceptance, respect, and empathy. It's a useful co-parenting tool to remind estranged parents and extended family how to approach their co-parenting challenges.

Communication

When asked, most co-parents say that their lack of communication is the first thing they'd like to improve. So, for that reason, the *C* in C.A.R.E. stands for communication. This includes not only speaking but also listening to your co-parent to ensure they feel understood. In co-parenting, how you choose to see a situation can either fuel conflict or foster cooperation. Shifting your perspective doesn't mean excusing bad behavior; it means choosing to lead with understanding rather than judgment. That small shift can open the door for better communication, fewer misunderstandings, and ultimately a more stable and peaceful environment for your children.

Although I touch on improving your communication throughout this book, I cover it extensively in Chapter 4.

Acceptance

The A in C.A.R.E. stands for acceptance. Acceptance is the cornerstone of building a strong co-parenting alliance. People have different histories and preferences, and that guides their actions. That's why acceptance is so important. It means acknowledging your co-parent as they are — flaws, strengths, and history rather than holding on to expectations of how you wish they would behave.

Acceptance doesn't excuse harmful behavior, but it does allow you to come from a place of reality rather than frustration. When you accept your co-parent, you reduce the emotional resistance that reinforces conflict and creates space for cooperation. It opens the door to focusing on shared goals, like the well-being of your child, instead of disagreeing purely to make a point. Ultimately, acceptance transforms tension into collaboration and turns co-parenting from a battleground to a functional partnership.

Respect

R is for respect. Treating your co-parent with respect means approaching them as your equal and recognizing that your co-parent's perspective holds just as much weight as your own. It's the willingness to pause, listen, and consider their feelings, needs, and ideas, even when they differ from your own. This doesn't mean you have to agree or give in, but it does mean valuing their role and experiences as legitimate. When both parents operate from this mindset, it shifts the relationship from a battle of wills to a partnership, showing children that differing viewpoints can coexist with understanding, cooperation, and dignity.

Empathy

E is for empathy. Displaying empathy means putting yourself in the other's shoes to feel what they're feeling or understand their point of view. If you assume your co-parent is acting out of malice or trying to make your life harder, you're most likely to respond defensively or even aggressively. But if you pause and consider the possibility that they're struggling, too, or simply doing the best they can with the tools they have, it changes the entire dynamic. Using empathy when communicating fuels respect by offering them the same consideration you'd like in each situation.

Key principles of co-parenting with C.A.R.E. Co-parenting with C.A.R.E. allows parents to problem-solve together on every level. You'll see how to incorporate the C.A.R.E. strategy throughout this book.

- » **Child-centered focus:** Placing your children's emotional and physical well-being above all else is at the heart of conscious co-parenting. Every decision, conversation, and interaction should be guided by the question: "Is this what's best for my child?"
- » **Mindful communication:** Using calm, respectful, and clear language reduces the risk of conflict and keeps conversations constructive. Stay focused on parenting, not the past.
- » **Cooperation and unity:** Parents present a united front, even if they're no longer together. When children see both parents working as a team, they feel stable and secure.
- » **Managed emotions:** Acknowledge your emotions, but don't let them lead your interactions. Conscious co-parenting requires you to respond, not react.
- » **Shared vision:** Agree on a long-term vision for your child's future. When both parents are looking forward rather than staying stuck in the past, it becomes easier to collaborate and make joint decisions.

Raising healthy kids with C.A.R.E.

To successfully raise children after a breakup, you need to **Communicate** with your child's other parent regularly — sometimes weekly, sometimes daily. **Accept** that reality early and make the necessary emotional adjustments. **Respect** your children enough to no longer put them in the painful position of watching their parents continue to argue long after the relationship has ended. Finally, put yourself in their shoes by feeling **Empathy**. Being party to parental conflict not only creates confusion for children but also leaves a child feeling helpless, torn, and unsure of where they belong. Your children deserve peace, and it's up to you to model how mature adults handle difficult interactions. Offer your children direction, not more confusion.

The following story highlights how parents' poor communication and ongoing conflicts can affect children in unsuspected ways. In this case, the parents believed they were co-parenting effectively, but their arguments, lack of clarity, and putting their child in the middle fueled her anxiety, causing her to withdraw from friends and family.

Madeline and Peter had been divorced for four years. They thought they were co-parenting just fine, but occasionally locked horns when trying to make decisions for 10-year-old Emma. Their biggest arguments were always about money. Unable to make ends meet, Madeline decided to return to court to seek increased child support, but it ended up being an amount that Peter couldn't afford. Peter

continued to pay the original amount, and the back child support kept piling up. When Peter bought a new truck, he was confident Madeline would be upset. Believing honesty to be the best policy, the next time Emma came over, Peter explained the entire loan procedure, including how Grandpa helped with the down payment. Then he told Emma that when her mother asked about the new truck, she could just explain what he told her.

Emma had listened to her dad's explanation, but she didn't understand a word of it. She had no idea what a down payment was or why Grandpa was now involved. Thinking that she would get into trouble if she didn't pass on the information exactly as she'd been told, she clammed up and didn't say a thing to her mother except that she didn't want to go back to her father's home.

Anticipating her mom's reaction when she found out about the truck, Emma started having trouble sleeping and had no appetite. Madeline was concerned but forgot about the changes she noticed in Emma when she saw Peter's new truck. She lost her temper right in front of Emma, calling Peter all sorts of terrible things and ending with "deadbeat dad." Not understanding what that was, Emma became more withdrawn. Neither parent understood what was wrong. Both blamed the other for the change in their child.

I first heard of this family's problem when I was asked to mediate their child support disagreement. Because Peter wasn't paying the full amount, Madeline thought it was fitting to reduce his time with his daughter. After all, Emma had said many times that she didn't want to return to her dad's home, so reducing Peter's time with Emma seemed like a logical request. I was called upon to determine if a change in the parenting plan was appropriate.

As Madeline, Peter, and I went through the mediation process, it was easy for me, an outsider, to understand what was going on, but it wasn't so easy for them to understand that their inability to communicate was contributing to the problem. It wasn't that Emma didn't want to see her father. She just hated being put in the middle of her angry parents, and she figured that if she refused to return to her dad's, she wouldn't have to take sides. Using her 10-year-old reasoning, if she stayed put, she wouldn't have to choose. This was a huge revelation for these parents because they firmly believed they were doing everything right. But their daughter's behavior drove home the fact that it wasn't the parenting plan that needed to change; it was their approach to co-parenting. They needed to start from scratch, adopt a more cooperative spirit, and improve their communication. They, like so many parents after a breakup, had to accept once and for all that it wasn't Madeline versus Peter, but Madeline *and* Peter *for* Emma. That realization — understanding that they were no longer partners in life, but continue to be partners in raising their child — made all the difference. They finally saw why working together was so important for the well-being of their child.

Your Work Isn't Done . . .

Your children love you, and they deserve an active, loving relationship with both of you — at the same time. You don't have to live together, but you must cooperate with each other if you want healthy, secure children. The thing that's often overlooked is that parents are teaching their children how to have a relationship with someone both before *and* after a breakup.



REMEMBER

Your work isn't done when you choose to break up. That's when your work starts. Until now, all your kids have seen is chaos. You must change that. It's why parents working together after a breakup is not only important, but imperative. Your children's well-being depends on it.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

For years medical and mental health professionals have known that difficulties in early life negatively influence outcomes later in life. This was finally documented in 1995–1997 in the landmark study that Dr. Vincent Felitti and Dr. Robert Anda conducted titled *The Adverse Childhood Experience Study*. The study measured the responses of 17,000 Kaiser Permanente members about their childhood experiences with various traumas, including domestic violence, drug addiction, mental health struggles, and neglect.

A 10-question questionnaire was used, and a number score was assigned to the intensity of the trauma that someone endured.



TIP

You can find that questionnaire at [www.bonusfamilies.com/ACE question anaire](http://www.bonusfamilies.com/ACE_questionnaire), and at www.dummies.com/go/coparentingfd.



REMEMBER

Parental separation is counted as one of the primary adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that contribute to the potential risk for health and social problems later in life.

Light at the end of the tunnel

Even though research suggests that children with divorced parents often show higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to those from intact families, it's important to note that this doesn't imply that every child from a divorced family will experience these challenges. Over time, a significant number of children can navigate these difficulties successfully, especially when their parents collaborate well while co-parenting.



REMEMBER

The impact of divorce on children is mainly shaped by the *level of parental conflict*, the strength of the child's support system, and the child's own ability to cope. In favorable conditions, many children not only cope with the changes but also thrive.

How well children cope with a parental breakup and the aftermath is clearly based on how well the parents cooperate with one another as they raise their children. But there's something in it for the parents, too: lower stress levels, reduced anger and frustration, less tension, and the promise of a positive future.

Truthfully, it's nothing special to fight with your ex. Most feel that way and buy into typical vindictive, combative behavior for years after their breakup. What's special is overcoming your animosity to work together in the name of your children. Becoming a supportive co-parent is something to be proud of, and that takes true dedication and integrity. Now you have a positive legacy to pass on to your children.

It's time to get to work.

