



How to be a better divorced parent



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Ari's sixth birthday party was perfect. Despite a late winter snowstorm, all his little friends made it to an indoor baseball stadium to play ball. There were baseball plates and balloons and a chocolate cake iced with green grass and miniature baseball characters running the bases. There were even ring pops – World Series rings – that turned all the kids' smiles blue and red, my boys, Ari and his four-year-old brother, Josh, included.

Although it was a great day for my kids, I nearly had a panic attack before the party began. This was the first time since my divorce from their father, Shawn, that we held a party that included not just me and Shawn but also Shawn's girlfriend and my boyfriend and his daughter. We made a strange extended family. It would be awkward, but we were determined to show that we were somehow, in some way, still a family. We wanted our kids to know that divorce didn't have to be a dirty word.

That party couldn't have happened had it not been for one significant process: mediation.

Although our divorce was nearing completion, we realized that if we wanted to parent as a unit over the long haul, we needed help learning to work together.

When we separated nearly three years ago, it felt like an apocalypse. We fought constantly. Days would go by when we didn't speak; it was too painful to hear his voice. During stressful times and legal proceedings, our hatred for each other was palpable. For weeks, we avoided eye contact at pickups and dropoffs – we literally couldn't stand the sight of one another.

Yet, our kids bound us together for life, even if our vows didn't. We had intended to teach our children to ride their bikes in front of our home, but after we split, our goal changed. We had to learn to get along well enough to walk our boys down the aisle at their weddings.

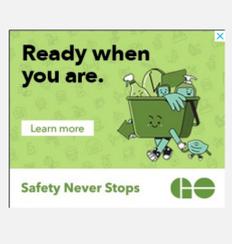
Building a strong co-parenting relationship has taken – and still is taking – an incredible amount of work. It's hard to compromise and listen when I resented watching Netflix alone, night after night, once I'd put the kids to bed. I didn't want to agree to change the kids' play dates at the last minute to accommodate Shawn's work schedule, after I'd taken the boys skiing and struggled to put on their ski boots and skis and hats and gloves all by myself. Being physically unable to tie their skates tight enough, and crying as I watched their ankles wobble through their lesson, made me subconsciously reluctant to call Shawn when the kids earned a new karate belt.

Raising kids really is a job for two people – at least – and I was resentful that I had to suddenly juggle bills and house repairs and a job and kids and dating all at once. My life had been turned upside down.

But if there was one thing we could agree on when we were too angry to agree on anything, it was that we needed help. Several months ago, we met with Stella Kavoukian, a mediator and therapist who works with children and adults experiencing a variety of issues, including separation and divorce. Our hope was to have her help us resolve disputes and improve our communication.

We had a stack of issues to sort through. There were feelings of aggravation and mistrust after we legally ended our marriage. We had said a rash of unkind things to one another that we couldn't take back. We struggled with the concept of having to raise kids together when it felt like we no longer even knew one another.

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Seeing a mediator was an emotional process, but we weren't capable of figuring out how to do this divorce thing right on our own. Before our first joint session, we each met with her separately to explain our concerns. At our first appointment together, Kavoukian laid down the ground rules, giving each of us a chance to speak and explain our perspective before the other could jump in. It was hard, at times, to keep us both in line, but no matter how many tissues we used, we were determined to see each session through to the end.

"Divorce is difficult and painful," Kavoukian said in an interview. "Regardless of who initiated the separation, it's a huge loss for each parent, as well as their children. Similar to when one loses a close friend or family member, there is much grieving involved. There is also usually quite a bit of apprehension, if not fear, regarding the future."

It's hard to cope – and to co-parent well – when you're balancing these feelings with meeting your children's needs. I used to sob in the car during the day and in my room until the sun rose. I didn't want my kids to see my face stained with mascara. Yet the ability to parent amid this emotional chaos is, perhaps, when it matters most.

"Kids do as well as their parents do," Kavoukian said. "We are their role models. The better that parents are able to communicate and resolve issues, the better their kids will be able to manage their own relationships throughout life."

I've spent a lot of time since my separation figuring out how to be happy, but therapy, combined with mediation, marked a turning point. There is one concept in particular that has stuck with me from our sessions with Kavoukian – the need to start from scratch. She suggested that Shawn and I learn to let go of the past and build a new relationship with one another on a whole other level. Thinking about things in that way – respecting and trusting one another as co-parents, rather than distrusting each other as former spouses – is what finally enabled us to move forward.

Today, we function more like business partners than friends, but we have added a few nice touches. We take the kids to buy one another gifts for our birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day. We sort out holidays easily enough so that our kids can spend vacation time with each of us. We trick or treat together every Halloween; neither of us can bear the thought of missing out simply because it's "not our day." We send one another photos of the kids, so that neither of us is excluded even from the parts of their lives that we are technically missing.

And a few times a year, we sit side by side, or with a chair in between us, through their hockey games and school holiday concerts, waving to our boys.

All this constant communication and compromise, all this thoughtfulness, makes us more functional in divorce than we were in marriage. At the birthday party, while all the kids devoured pizza, Shawn stepped toward me.

"Did you see Ari's home run today?" he asked.

"Yeah – Ari played so well. And did you see how fast Josh was running?"

We beamed at our boys with the kind of overwhelming love that only parents can feel.

At the end of the party, once the loot bags had been handed out and all the other kids had left, my kids clambered into Shawn's car for their weekly Saturday night sleepover. I climbed into mine and went my separate way.

Stella Kavoukian's tips for co-parenting

Stella Kavoukian, a mediator and therapist based in Toronto, tells parents that the alternative to compromise is often the legal system. "Going this route, apart from being emotionally and financially draining, forces parents to take opposing positions rather than work collaboratively," she says. "Philosophically, this is a poor place to start when trying to work toward a child's best interests."

She offers this co-parenting advice for divorced parents:

- Know that successful co-parenting involves parents working together to create security, stability and consistency between the two homes.
- Help your children have meaningful and healthy relationships with each parent by supporting the other parent and their household. By being positive, you will promote more open communication between you, your child and your co-parent.
- Whenever you are unsure what to do, make your children and their needs your guiding light.
- Try not to blame the other parent. It is not helpful to anyone. It risks leaving your child feeling like they are caught in the middle and need to take sides.
- Don't use your children as messengers by communicating through them; if you cannot communicate directly, use a professional.
- Don't "parentify" your child, or make your child feel that he or she has to take care of you.
- Save your energy and resources to focus on those areas that are of most importance to you and your child. Avoid conflict over minor concerns.
- Remember that you cannot control the other parent, but you can control your own behaviour and your response to provocations.

For help with co-parenting issues, try an agency such as Families in Transition, Jewish Family and Child Service, or Catholic Family Services. Your family doctor or lawyer may also be able to provide you with names. The cost of a mediator may range from \$225 to \$375 an hour. Erin Silver

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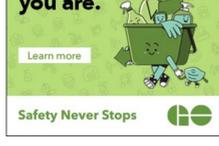
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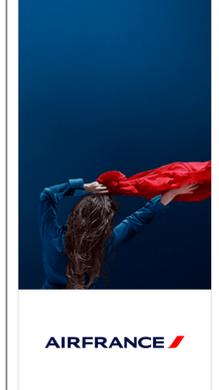
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