

Parenting After Divorce

How to work together with your ex-spouse
for happier, healthier children.



CommonSteps™ Series: Book One



Common Steps
Common Steps

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for happier, healthier children.

By Ron L. Deal, LMFT



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Creating a Healthy Co-Parent Relationship

The challenges of co-parenting are real, but you can do it. We are pleased to partner with Ron L. Deal to offer you some instruction and tools to improve your parenting. After all, your children deserve your best. The following material is taken from the book, "The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family," and applies to ex-spouses and those who share a child from a previous relationship. Learning to respond to the other household in such a way that children thrive in a safe environment of love and limits is a true gift to your children.

The mission of CommonSteps™ is to help non-traditional families better communicate, coordinate, and cooperate for the benefit of their children after a divorce, separation or other circumstance causes them to be apart. We provide low-cost support services that address all aspects of what families are going through. We also provide information and educational opportunities via this CommonSteps™ booklet series, speaking engagements and workshops to support the emotional needs of the entire family.

CommonSteps™ is a membership-based web site that contains educational and support services sponsored by churches, businesses and professionals committed to helping families. Please visit our Web site at www.commonsteps.org to find out more about our classes and connect to your local community, including churches, therapists, counselors, and workshops, for support resources. We hope this booklet and our Web site help you and your family succeed.



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An Open Letter to Parents Who Are Divorced:



This letter is about your children and the invaluable role you will play in bringing healing to their lives. You see, since the moment you and your ex-spouse informed them of your impending divorce, your children have been in a transitional crisis. How well they recover from that crisis has a lot to do with you, that is, your continuing role as a parent. Whether you are the custodial parent or the non-custodial parent, you play a vital role in the emotional adjustment of your children.

Consider, for example, the following empirical data:

Children successfully adjust to the ending of their parents' marriage and can fare reasonably well if: 1) the parents are able to bring their marital relationship to an end without excessive conflict; 2) children are not put into the middle of whatever conflicts exist; and 3) there is a commitment from parents to cooperate on issues of the children's material, physical, educational, and emotional welfare.¹

It is this last point that I am emphasizing here. Please understand that I am not necessarily asking you to reconcile with your former spouse. However, it is very important that you and your ex-spouse separate the dissolution of your marriage from the parental responsibilities that remain. In other words, while your marriage has ended, your role as a parent has not.

This notion is sometimes referred to as co-parenting and involves the cooperation of both biological parents even while living in separate households. I do realize, however, that many ex-spouses have great difficulty cooperating about anything, let alone the nurture and discipline of their children. That does not absolve you of the responsibility to try (perhaps even harder than you did on your marriage). After all, your children deserve your best effort. If necessary, perhaps a trained family therapist can help you and your ex-spouse negotiate your co-parental arrangement.

Whatever the case, please, for their sake, assume the responsibility of being involved in the lives of your children. Please understand this letter has not been about casting blame nor is it intended to add to your level of guilt. It is simply an earnest plea that you offer your children the most valuable resource you have---yourself.

Sincerely,

Ron L. Deal, LMFT (Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist)
Author, "The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family"

Table of Contents

<i>Co-Parenting--What's the Goal?</i>	1
<i>What Does a Co-parent Relationship Look Like?</i>	2
<i>Children Living in Two "Countries"</i>	5
<i>Guidelines for Co-Parents Between Homes</i>	12
<i>Building the Co-Parental Relationship</i>	14
<i>Dissolving Marital Bonds/Retaining Parental Ones</i>	14
<i>Ex-Spouses: What's Your Type?</i>	17
<i>Spoiled Leftovers From the Past: Coping With Anger, Hurt and Guilt</i>	19
<i>Some Practical Observations About Forgiveness</i>	22
<i>Questions for You</i>	24
<i>Action Points for Co-Parents</i>	25
<i>Keep the Goal in Mind</i>	25
<i>Learn How to Invite Cooperation</i>	25
<i>Be Business-Like if Necessary.</i>	26
<i>Be Prepared by Borrowing a Script and Sticking to It.</i>	27
<i>Get Organized and Stay on Track.</i>	33
<i>Develop An Action Plan.</i>	34
<i>Questions For All Couples</i>	35
<i>Questions for Pre-Remarital Couples</i>	37
<i>Consider Your Child(ren)</i>	38
<i>Children's Bill of Rights</i>	40
<i>More CommonSteps™ Resources</i>	43
<i>References</i>	44

Co-Parenting--What's the Goal?

At a minimum, biological parents should contain their anger and conflict in order to cooperate and compromise on issues of the children's welfare. At a maximum, co-parents can strive to enforce similar rules and standards of conduct in each of the children's homes. Most co-parents find it difficult to accomplish the former; only a few are able to achieve the latter. Nevertheless, co-parents should do everything they can to build cooperation between their two homes.

A healthy co-parent relationship does not mean children will not experience emotional or psychological distress. "Numerous studies document that children who experience parental divorce exhibit more conduct problems, more symptoms of psychological maladjustment, lower academic achievement, more social difficulties, and poorer self-concepts compared with children living in intact, two-parent families."²



Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal research discovered that the effects of divorce are often lifelong and traumatic for children.³ Even Mavis Hetherington's research, which gives hope to parents by pointing out that 80 percent of children from divorced homes eventually adapt to their new life, acknowledges that 20 percent will continuously display impulsive, irresponsible, antisocial behavior, and depression.⁴ In addition, children face greater levels of family conflict while the stepfamily is integrating (compared to nuclear family children)⁵ and are at increased risk for developmental behavioral problems, health problems, and substance abuse.⁶

Stepfamily conflict and ex-spouse conflict have a number of negative effects on children and are contributing factors

in all of the following statistics. Children in stepfamilies are less likely to complete high school,⁷ have lower educational achievement,⁸ leave home earlier,⁹ and are more likely to cohabit before marriage.¹⁰ Finally, it's worth noting that boys are more affected by divorce, but girls seem to be more affected by remarriage¹¹.

Parents who want to reduce these negative effects on their children should strive to

“...strive to be effective co-parents because it reduces between-home conflict and increases cooperation.”

be effective co-parents because it reduces between-home conflict and increases cooperation. Taming your tongue, for example, is critical to cooperating. Conflict containment starts with

controlling your speech. You cannot be an effective co-parent without doing so.

What Does a Co-parent Relationship Look Like?

As stated above, the goal of co-parenting (at a minimum) is to contain the anger and conflict with your ex-spouse in order to cooperate and compromise on issues of the children's welfare. I'll let the children explain what a functional co-parental relationship means in practical, everyday terms.

Julie, twelve, complained in a therapy session that she couldn't invite both her parents to her music recital *“If they both come they'll just scowl every chance they get. I tried inviting them both last year, and Mom wouldn't speak to me for two days because Dad brought Amy [stepmom] with him. She refuses to be in the same room with them.”* Julie learned to take turns inviting her mom and dad. If one couldn't attend, she could invite the other. Unfortunately, this put her in constant turmoil, as she was forced to choose which parent she would invite to certain events. If the other wanted to come but couldn't, Julie heard that parent's disappointment and

felt guilty. *“Why can’t they just put aside their differences and tolerate a couple of hours in the same room?”* Good question.

Because Terrance’s parents always ended up fighting on the phone, he became the middleman to their visitation arrangements. His mother stopped speaking to his father and asked Terrance, at age nine, to communicate her preferences for drop off and pick up. Terrance had no choice but to oblige, since he enjoyed spending time with his father on weekends.

In both these examples, children carried undue emotional anxiety and burden because their parents could not set aside their differences and be adults. An effective co-parent arrangement for Julie’s parents would mean she could invite both parents to her recitals and not worry whether they were fighting or anxious. An effective arrangement for Terrance’s parents would include their finding a way to talk rationally about their schedules instead of triangulating Terrance. The bottom line is a system that allows children to be children and adults to be their parents.

Co-parenting does not mean sharing all decisions about the children or that either home is accountable to the other for their choices, rules, or standards. Each household should be autonomous, but share responsibility for the children. It also does not mean that rules or punishment from one home cross over to the other home.

Karen sought therapy in part because her ex-husband, Ted, refused to carry out the consequences she imposed on their children. In one instance, her teenage son lied about his homework, so she grounded him from weekend activities. The scheduled visitation meant her son would be going to his dad’s house that weekend, so she called her ex to ask him

“...children carried undue emotional anxiety and burden because their parents could not set aside their differences...”

to honor the punishment and keep their son home on Friday and Saturday nights.

Ted refused, saying that was his only time with his son and he wasn't obligated to fulfill her decisions. That angered Karen and she hoped the therapist could intervene and

"...don't insist the other home follow your rules."

get Ted to cooperate. The therapist refused because to do so would be to cross an important boundary, taking control of Ted's home away from him. Karen's therapist explained that if her son was grounded, she should wait

until he came back to her home to carry out the punishment. Her home is within her control. Ted's home is not.

You might be thinking, but I thought you just said that co-parents should strive to enforce similar rules and cooperate regarding the children? Didn't that obligate Ted to honor her request?

Yes, I did say that between-home cooperation, even to the point of carrying out the other home's punishment, is a goal some co-parents obtain. However, that does not obligate either side to do so. If you can achieve this level of cooperation, terrific. If not, don't insist the other home follow your rules.

Incidentally, this control issue between Karen and Ted was nothing new. It was as old as their failed marriage. Divorce doesn't end the dynamics of family relationships; it merely reorganizes them into separate households. Well into divorce most ex-spouses are still trying to change, control, or influence their ex in the same manner they did before they divorced.

If it didn't work then, why should it work now? (Truly this is one of the great insanities of divorce --trying to change someone from whom you are divorced even though you couldn't change him or her while married!)

People who can't stop reacting to an ex-spouse in the same old ways haven't really obtained emotional divorce (sometimes called de-coupling). They are still emotionally invested in what their ex does. Letting go of control is tough, but it helps co-parents respect one another's boundaries and work better as a team.

Children Living in Two "Countries"

Let's examine stepfamily life from the child's point of view. What do children in stepfamilies need from the parenting team? What factors help children adjust to a changing family composition over which they have no control? What are some healthy principles for managing between-home contact?

First, it is important for the parenting team to understand that following a divorce, children live in two "countries."¹² They hold citizenship in each country and are, therefore, invested in the quality of life found in both. The parenting team should do everything they can to help children thrive and enjoy each of their two homes. But living in two countries does require some adjustments.



"What if the rules in my ex's home are different from the rules in our home?" is a question commonly asked. *"It all depends on your diplomacy and how cooperative you are as an ambassador,"* I respond. Let me explain.

Shortly after my wife and I married, we went with my parents to Kenya for a brief missionary effort. My parents continued to lead an annual trip to Kenya for about fifteen years,

coordinating volunteers' mission efforts in East Africa. I will never forget going on safari in the Masai Mara and seeing animals in the wild: lions, cheetahs, giraffe, and hundreds of other wild animals Americans can only see in a zoo. But what

"Sometimes children need gentle reminders from their parents about what the rules are..."

I remember most distinctly was the radical change in culture that we experienced. Clothing was different, social customs seemed odd, the economy and systems of government were unknown to us --we even had to learn to drive on the left side of the road.

Despite all these shifts in customs, ritual behaviors, and rules of conduct, we learned to adapt quite quickly. Because my parents returned to Kenya year after year, the changes grew more predictable for them and, therefore, were not as traumatic as our first trip together. But they always experienced an adjustment period when traveling between countries. One year my father returned to the U.S. and began driving on the left side of the road. The oncoming traffic abruptly reminded him of the change in driving system! But generally speaking, my parents quickly adapted to their current living arrangement.

You can see the parallel with children living in two homes. At first, the fact that the two countries have different rules, customs, and expectations may require an extended adjustment. Later, when the territory is familiar, only a brief adjustment time is required, especially when the rules and expectations are predictable. Sometimes children need gentle reminders from their parents about what the rules are ("*You may be able to play before homework at your mom's house, but here the rule is...*"), but generally speaking, children can adjust rather well.

Can you imagine what travel for my parents would have been like if Kenya and the United States had been at war? Getting on a plane and heading to the "other side," even to do mission work, would have been considered treason. And once they

landed, they would have been met with anger and rage as co-workers protested how awful the other country was because of their wartime tactics.

How would my parents function under that kind of stress? How would they cope with the external pressures to choose an allegiance to one side or the other? Every comment and criticism would be loaded with a battle for their loyalty, and trust would be defeated at every turn. And what if they decided to be ambassadors between the warring governments --would they have a voice? Depending on how suspicious the governments and how convinced they were that the other side would never change, their attempts to bring peace would likely fail. What a losing position to be caught in.

An old African proverb says, "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." Biological parents who fight and refuse to cooperate are trampling on their most prized possession --their children. Elephants at war are totally unaware of what is happening to the grass, for they are far too consumed with the battle at hand. Little do they know how much damage is being done.

"Biological parents who fight and refuse to cooperate are trampling on their most prized possession - their children. "

Researcher James Bray has confirmed what many therapists have believed for years. When one parent speaks negatively about a child's other biological parent, the child internalizes the comment. In other words, "a child who hears a parent attacked thinks, in some way, he is also being attacked."¹³ A simple comment like, "Your father is late again. He can be so irresponsible," cuts the child as well as the parent. If the child is ever late for anything, she knows (or think she knows) how you feel about her.

In addition, a negative comment subtly invites children to agree with the comment, which children hate to do. It implies they are choosing one parent over the other, and that brings guilt. Because of the internalized negativity and guilt over having to choose sides, Bray goes on to suggest that the child will eventually act out such hurt and anger in some destructive behavior. I say you can count on it.

"...a child who hears a parent attacked thinks, in some ways, he is also being attacked."

Are you making a POW swap every other weekend? How often do you trample your children's loyalties to the other country in an effort to persuade them to remain faithful to you? How has your new stepfamily affected the amount of time children have with the other home? As citizens of two countries, your children should be privileged to all the rights, relationships, and responsibilities of each of those homes. Your job is to be at peace with the other country so your children can travel back and forth in security.

Guidelines for Co-Parents

The following are guidelines that will help you to help your children move back and forth between their two homes. All co-parents should seek to live according to these guidelines.¹⁴ Consider how you might make each a reality in your situation. Remember that you are responsible for your contribution to how you and your ex interact. Change your part of the interaction even if you believe your ex-spouse is to blame for the negative exchanges that have occurred in the past.

1. Work hard to respect the other parent and his or her household.

Agree that each parent has a right to privacy and do not intrude in his or her life. Make space for different parenting styles and rules as there are many healthy ways to raise

children. Do not demean the other's living circumstances, activities, dates, or decisions and give up the need to control your ex's parenting style. If you have concerns, speak directly to the other parent (see Co-parenting Scripts, page 25-29).

2. Schedule a monthly (perhaps more often) "business" meeting to discuss co-parenting matters.

You can address schedules, academic reports, behavioral training, and spiritual development. Do not discuss your personal life (or your ex's); that part of your relationship is no longer appropriate. If the conversation turns away from the children simply redirect the topic or politely end the meeting. If you cannot talk with your ex face to face due to conflict, use email or speak to the answering machine. Do what you can to make your meetings productive for the children.

3. Never ask your children to be spies or tattle-tales on the other home.

This places them in a loyalty bind that brings great emotional distress. In fact, be happy when they enjoy the people in their new home. (*"I'm glad you enjoy fishing with your step-dad."*) If children offer information about life in the other home, listen and stay neutral in your judgment.



4. When children have confusing or angry feelings toward your ex, don't capitalize on their hurt and berate the other parent.

Listen and help them to explore their feelings without trying to sway their opinions with your own. If you can't make

positive statements about the other parent, strive for neutral ones.

5. Children should have everything they need in each home.

Don't make them bring basic necessities back and forth. Special items, like clothes or a comforting teddy bear, can move back and forth as needed.

6. Try to release your hostility toward the other parent so that the children can't take advantage of your hard feelings.

"Manipulation is much easier when ex-spouses don't cooperate."

Manipulation is much easier when ex-spouses don't cooperate.

7. Do not disappoint your children with broken promises or by being unreliable.

Do what you say, keep your visitation schedule as agreed, and stay active in their life.

8. Make your custody structure work for your children even if you don't like the details of the arrangement.

Update the other when changes need to be made to the visitation schedule. Also, inform the other parent of any change in job, living arrangements, etc. which may require an adjustment by the children.

9. If you plan to hire a baby-sitter for more than four hours while the children are in your home, give the other parent first right to that time.

10. Suggest that younger children take a favorite toy or game as a transitional object.

This can help them make the transition and to feel more comfortable in the other home.

11. Regarding children who visit for short periods of time or spend time in another home:

Sometimes it is tempting to only do “special activities” when all of the children are with you. That may leave some children feeling that they aren’t as special as others. Do special things with differing combinations of children (it’s all right if someone feels disappointed he or she wasn’t able to go).

Let the lives of those living with you remain unaltered, as much as possible, when other children come for visitation. Keep toys and possessions in a private spot where they are not to be touched or borrowed unless the owner gives permission (even while they are in the other home).

12. Help children adjust when going to the other home:

If the children will go on vacation while in the other home, find out what’s on the agenda. You can help your kids pack special items and needed clothing.

Provide the other home with information regarding your child’s changes. A switch in preferences (regarding music, clothes, hair styles, foods, etc.) or physical/cognitive/emotional developments can be significant. Let the other home know what is different before the child arrives.

“Let the lives of those living with you remain unaltered, as much as possible, when other children come for visitation.”

When receiving children, give them time to unpack, relax, and settle in. Try not to overwhelm them at first with plans, rules, or even special treatment. Let them work their way in at their own pace.¹⁵

13. If you and your ex cannot resolve a problem or change in custody or visitation, agree to problem solving through mediation rather than litigation.

Tools for Helping Children Thrive Between Homes

1. When children return from the other home, share what has been going on since they left.



Upon return, it's very common for parents to ask what the child has done over the weekend or summer (not trying to make the child a spy, but simply taking interest in the child's life). However, rarely do parents take the time to tell their children what has been

happening in their home while the child was away. This helps children to know the mood of the home and invites them to find their place in the flow. Remember that belonging can be an issue. Help children find their place.

2. Send lists of items to be returned.

Children often forget items, such as their math book, and co-parents may assume it is being returned. Send a checklist of items that need to be returned so the child can be responsible (if old enough), or the co-parent can make sure it is returned.

3. Give children a little "grace space" as they adjust to your house and rules.

Children can adjust to different rules in different homes. However, they may need gentle reminders of the rules in your home after spending time in the other. A simple reminder like, "I know you can stay up till nine at your mom's house, but the rule in our house is 8:30. Off you go." Don't argue with the other house's rule or take issue with the rule-makers. Just

manage your home and give the kids a break while they re-orient themselves.

4. “Choosing sides stinks!”

Try not to force loyalties as children move between homes. The transition from one house to the other is a natural time of comparison for kids. Don't ask them to make choices, and answer their questions regarding the other home with neutral, supportive statements. If you can't be supportive, don't expect your child to adopt your opinion and don't denigrate the other home.

“Children can adjust to different rules in different homes. However, they may need gentle reminders...”

5. “Who needs me the most?”

When examining their fit in both homes, children often ask themselves which home needs them most. Even though their personal preference is with one home or the other, children will sometimes choose to invest themselves in the home where they are most needed. This could be due to an under-functioning parent who “needs help,” or perhaps the child has a unique role in one home she doesn't have in the other.

The result is a child who sacrifices her preference for the good of others. Parents need to be understanding about this. Try not to take personally a child who is drawn to the other home; ask questions and listen to what pressures he faces. It may be that he can't fix the situation and needs to be relieved of the responsibility to do so. But it also may be that there is a legitimate reason for him to spend more time in the other home (e.g., a parent's illness that requires extra support from him).

Building the Co-Parental Relationship

Now we know what we're trying to accomplish as co-parents, but how do we get there?" Obviously, a cooperative relationship with someone you used to fight with is not an easy task. In fact, this is where someone usually points out that conflict with his or her ex-spouse is not a thing of the past. *"Sounds great to me --I'd love to have that kind of relationship with my children's parent. But he won't try. Everything I do always backfires or gets sabotaged. What can I do about that?"*

Believe me, I understand, it takes two to make any cooperative relationship work. Nevertheless, do what you can. (Notice, rarely does someone admit that he or she contributes to a difficult co-parent relationship. Pointing the finger of blame is always easier). This section will help you understand the emotional issues at play and provide practical ideas for building a better co-parental relationship.

Dissolving Marital Bonds/Retaining Parental Ones

As you attempt to build or strengthen your co-parent relationship it may be helpful to understand the emotional tasks of ending your marital relationship while still maintaining your parental one. When a man and woman marry they form a husband-wife relationship. Later, when children are brought into the marriage, the same two people form yet another relationship. This father-mother relationship is focused on the partnership of raising a child while the husband-wife relationship is based on romantic love, companionship, and sexuality.

The boundary between these two types of relationship is blurred and weak. For example, couples are well aware of how disagreements over discipline or which values to teach children can easily turn into marital rifts that pit husband against wife. What starts out as a parental issue quickly becomes a marital issue.

The challenge for couples after divorce is to dissolve their marital relationship and create a strong boundary between old marital issues and the current parental relationship. This is a terribly difficult task to accomplish for most people. In effect, the couple redefines their relationship to one of parents only (partners trying to raise a child), not lovers. This is especially difficult when old buttons get pushed and past marital pain is resurrected through parental disagreement. Unless ex-spouses actively set aside their previous marital agendas, they will easily fall back into personal attacks and manipulative ploys. Again the elephants start fighting and the grass gets trampled.

How many times have you heard of someone withholding visitation to a former spouse because the ex is a little behind with child support payments? In effect, one parent holds a child hostage until the child support ransom is paid. *“But you don’t understand. My ex was always irresponsible with money and is selfish even today. The only reason he doesn’t pay is because he can’t stand to part with material things.”* So you’re going to change him by withholding his children? Or better yet, your power is possession of the kids and since he won’t share, you won’t either? Does that sound like an old marital issue --that is supposed to be buried in a grave somewhere --or a parental one?

Another example of ex-spouses who have not adequately dissolved their marital bonds involves too much contact. Dave and his new stepfamily came for therapy when his eight-year-old son became unmanageable. Like most stepfamilies they struggled with many integration issues. One particular dynamic caught my attention. It involved his frequent calls to his ex-wife to discuss their son’s difficulties at school. This was a problem for his new wife because Dave seemed very controlled by his ex during their marriage and

“...create a strong boundary between old marital issues and the current parental relationship.”

she feared he was letting her have too much power even now.

I asked Dave to help me understand the reason for his daily phone calls. He shared that during the marriage his ex-wife had been very critical of his parenting and now frequently threatened to take custody of their son due to his “parental incompetence.” Dave was fearful of losing his son. Even more important, however, was Dave’s ongoing effort to earn his ex-wife’s approval (which was easily withheld). They hadn’t been married for three years, but he was still emotionally starving for her approval. This need was leading to too much contact with his ex-wife, which debilitated him even further.

The impact was subtle, but very critical to his son’s misbehavior. Dave parented out of fear and anxiety of how his ex would evaluate him, which stole his ability to effectively manage his son. He was easily overrun by the boy and manipulated by his ex-wife. Once he began acting out of strength instead of fear and set appropriate communication boundaries with his ex-wife, his competency increased dramatically and his son’s misbehavior diminished.

“Many parents who were poor marriage partners are good parents and children enjoy them very much.”

Putting to death the old marital bond with all its pain, power, and privilege is difficult. Yet, it is just what the doctor ordered for effective co-parenting to begin. Your ex may have been inattentive to your marital needs, but you and your children have different needs. Many parents who were poor marriage partners are good parents and children enjoy them very much.

Men in particular often improve their parenting activity after divorce, yet their ex-wives assume they haven’t changed and don’t give them the respect they deserve. Give your ex-spouse the opportunity to be wonderful with the kids, even

if he wasn't wonderful with you. Separate your marital past from your parental present and do everything you can to make the co-parental relationship work.

Ex-Spouses: What's Your Type?

In her book, *The Good Divorce*, family researcher Constance Ahrons identified five types of ex-spouse relationships. Consider her descriptions and see where you and your ex fit.

Perfect Pals:

These couples are high interacters --high communicators and comprised just 12 percent of her research sample.

Even though these couples were divorced, their friendship behaviors continued. They still considered themselves good friends, spoke once or twice a week, and were interested in each other's lives. They remained connected with family and old friends.

"Give your ex-spouse the opportunity to be wonderful with the kids, even if he wasn't wonderful with you."

Not many of these couples remained in this category, but moved on to less cooperative relationships. Also, five years after their divorce they had not recoupled with new partners. (Indeed it's difficult to establish a new relationship while holding on to a former spouse.)

Cooperative Colleagues:

These moderate interacters --high communicators represented 38 percent of the research sample. While not considering each other best friends, these couples did cooperate quite well around issues that concerned the children.

Some talked frequently, others minimally. For the most part, they were able to compromise when it came to dividing up time with the children. In handling conflict, they usually

didn't end up in vicious battles, but resolved issues or avoided them.

A common denominator for these couples was the ability to compartmentalize their relationship; that is, they separated out issues related to their marital relationship from those related to their parenting relationship. Their desire to provide the best situation for their children took precedence over their personal issues."¹⁶

Angry Associates:

These moderate interacters --low communicators (25 percent of sample) communicated only to make plans for their children and usually got angry doing so. Conflict was the major issue for these couples. Unlike cooperative colleagues, they were not able to compartmentalize their anger, but found it spreading to most aspects of their interaction.

"A common denominator for these couples was the ability to compartmentalize their relationship. "

Fiery Foes:

These low interacters --low communicators made up about 25 percent of the sample. "These ex-spouses rarely interact and when they do talk

they usually end up fighting. Their divorces tended to be highly litigious, and their legal battles often continued for many years after the divorce. Each change brings further anger. They were not able to work out arrangements for the children without arguing. Many relied on a third party (i.e., a lawyer, friend, or child) to settle their disagreements over each issue as it arose."¹⁷

Dissolved Duos:

These ex-spouse pairs stop contact entirely. It was common for one ex-spouse to move away and leave little or no contact. There is no two-household arrangement here, truly a single-parent family. ¹⁸

Did you find your type or the one that most aptly describes your current ex-spouse relationship? What type is your new

spouse and his or her ex? Which of these types should co-parents strive for?

Cooperative Colleagues works best. If you look closely at the description you can see why: They have the ability to compartmentalize personal issues relating to their marriage from parenting issues relating to their children. They are able to dissolve their marital issues while continuing to work together as parents. They simply don't allow old marital junk to spoil their ability to cooperate.

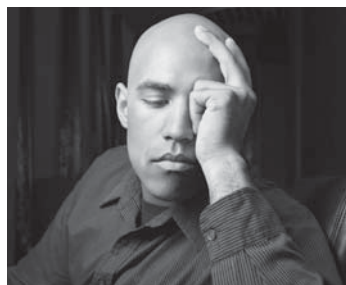
"Their desire to provide the best situation for their children took precedence over their personal issues."

What if you find yourself an Angry Associate or a Fiery Foe? Take control of yourself and make changes to your part of the relationship. Improving your ex-spouse relationship, even if you have an "impossible" ex, is not completely out of your control. You can always control yourself and not give in to anger or pain. Yet the obstacles for some are many. Let me offer some tools to help you to be a Cooperative Colleague.

Spoiled Leftovers From the Past: Coping With Anger, Hurt, and Guilt

Relational attachments come in many shapes and sizes. The highest attachment is, of course, selfless covenant love. What surprises most people is the realization that hurt, anger, and guilt can tie two people together as tightly as love. The root of such attachments is pain; it binds people together in disharmony. Even more surprising is the realization that conflict, bitterness, and control are the umbilical cords through which anger and guilt stay alive. As criticism and defensiveness pass back and forth between ex-spouses, hurt and the bond of disharmony is kept alive. One of the greatest ironies of bitterness is it imprisons you with the person who hurt you. Over time you actually contribute to your own pain and misery.

If you are the leaver (your ex left you) you probably feel more anger, rejection, and hurt. If you cannot set this aside and compartmentalize your feelings, you can easily spoil the co-parental relationship. If you were the leaver (you initiated the divorce) you may feel a great deal of guilt, especially when you see your children's pain. You may find it difficult to separate from your decision and fully invest in your present stepfamily situation.



Your new spouse may feel insecure with your commitment and your stepchildren may feel rejected by you. Your guilt may even lead you to keep your ex-spouse from being angry with you. For example, some feel obligated to their ex

and go out of their way to accommodate them regarding money, time schedules, or taking care of maintenance tasks for their ex-spouse's home. For both the leaver and leaver, whether you feel guilt or rejection, your pain is dictating your responses. You are locked in a prison cell of pain and your continued negative interaction is keeping the key beyond your reach.

Learning to Forgive

So what do you do? Let it go with forgiveness. I know this is where I'll lose some of you. Your back is already bowed, your blood pressure is going up, and you want to close the booklet. *"After what he did to me, how dare you suggest I forgive?"*

One woman heard me discussing the necessity of forgiveness as a tool to improve co-parent relationships and she was offended. She called to say, *"My ex left me for another woman and now she is my kids' stepmother. There's no way I*

can forgive him for that and I won't accept her place with my children. In fact, I'm doing everything I can to sabotage her authority." She went on to explain how she was telling her children to disobey their stepmother since she broke up their family.

Please understand, I don't take the suggestion to forgive lightly, nor do I believe it an easy task. I was

"One of the greatest ironies of bitterness is it imprisons you with the person who hurt you."

a crisis counselor after the Westside school shooting here in Jonesboro, Arkansas and also worked with a number of the families who were so painfully impacted by that event. Never have I seen such pain or crying out to God. Never have I felt so inadequate as a therapist. And my passion for those who lost so much on March 24, 1998 would not allow me to flippantly urge them to "forgive and move on." To discount the value of lives lost in such a way would be reprehensible. Yet, the ability to offer forgiveness eventually became the backbone of healing for those I worked with.

Your pain is real, too, and your anger may be completely justified. Yet you can't be for your family everything you need to be if you're carrying around a burden of anger, hurt, and guilt. The woman caller mentioned above used her children to seek revenge and threw her children into the middle of a war. Such a misguided solution generates pain for innocent people and keeps your pain alive and well.

Forgiveness is an unnatural act of a will that has been shaped and molded by a forgiving God. There is nothing human about it. Forgiveness doesn't restore the broken relationship or repair the emotional damage done. It simply writes it off. And it only becomes practically possible to us when we realize what God has forgiven us. Be humbled by the magnitude of your forgiven debt and you'll discover that the unnatural act of forgiving is possible.

Some Practical Observations About Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness begins with a decision.

The process of forgiveness begins with our intellect. Saying the words, “*I forgive Lisa for abandoning me and our family,*” starts a process of forgiveness. The challenge then becomes living that choice. Please know that emotional release, a letting go of pain and hurt, follows the intellectual decision to forgive, not the other way around. Until emotional release is achieved, peace comes in the form of trust. The feeling of peace may occur immediately or gradually; until then it is the promise of peace that keeps us going.

2. Choose to forgive one offense at a time.

All too often we face a mountain of hurt that cannot be overcome. Make a list of the boulders that comprise that mountain and strive to forgive them individually. Take it in manageable pieces.

3. Communicating your forgiveness is optional.

For some relief comes just by having made a personal decision to forgive. Others need to communicate their decision to bring closure to the process. Do what is best in your situation.

4. Forgiveness and accountability are not mutually exclusive.

We can forgive someone and still hold him or her accountable for his or her actions (not for revenge or personal gain). For example, you can forgive an ex-spouse for driving drunk with your children in the car, but you don’t have to then subject your children to future possible harm. Work with your ex and/or the court system to ensure safety (e.g., another person must be present when driving) until your ex is demonstrating more responsible behavior.

5. Forgiveness takes one; trust and reconciliation takes two.

Mercy can be extended to someone without reestablishing trust. Many resist forgiveness because they believe they will be forced into making themselves vulnerable to the other person again. If a bank employee steals from a bank he can be forgiven, and still not given his job back. There is nothing wrong with learning from your past experience with someone and protecting yourself or others from hurt. Just check your motives.

6. Forgiveness is empowering.

Holding on to hurt and pain enslaves us to the person who hurt us. Conflict and bitterness keep alive our hurt. The result is a helpless victim.

Have you ever been guilty of constantly blaming your poor life circumstances on someone else? That's what victims do—constantly complain about how others have ruined their life. In doing so, victims alleviate themselves from personal responsibility for the condition of their life.

“We can forgive someone and still hold him or her accountable for his or her actions.”

7. Forgiveness moves us from a victim to an empowered victor.

It breaks the chains of imprisonment and severs the umbilical cord that gave life to the pain. When you forgive, you no longer have to react to the other out of pain, but have free choice to decide the best course of action.

For example, an ex-spouse might continue to act as a Fiery Foe, but you do not have to return fire (as in the past). Forgiveness is the key that opens your prison cell door. As ex-concentration camp victim Corrie Ten Boom said, *“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.”*

Questions for You

While forgiveness is fresh on your mind, take a minute write a brief answer to the following.

1. What offenses or leftovers from the past do I have before me?

2. Which of these can I decide to forgive today?

3. Decide how you will continue to struggle with forgiving the remaining items.

4. What personal acts do I need to repent of or seek forgiveness for?

ACTION POINTS FOR CO-PARENTS

Keep the Goal in Mind

Working with an uncooperative ex-spouse is difficult, especially when the ghost of marriage past begs you to not give the other any credit for change.

On some level many ex-spouses need to view the other as incapable of change. This leads us to look for evidence that the ex is the same and can't be trusted; we might also discount evidence to the contrary. Keeping the goal in mind means



doing everything you can to be a Cooperative Colleague and remaining open to the possibility that your ex-spouse might change along life's way.

When treating children who are members of a post-divorce family or stepfamily, a standard part of my clinical work is to call ex-spouses for a consultation. I generally find them to be much less disagreeable than the other parent assumes they will be. In fact, they are often eager to improve the living conditions for their children. Remember, if you can grow through your divorce and change, so can they.

Learn How to Invite Cooperation

Some parents can, after reading this material, simply call their ex-spouse, share this booklet, and have a rational meeting to discuss how they might better implement the Guidelines for Co-Parents section. If that is within your power, by all means set up the meeting soon. Angry Associates and Fiery Foes,

however, will fear a face-to-face meeting believing it will erupt world war three.

"You just don't understand. My ex is a jerk and won't listen to anything I say. If I mail her a copy of your book she'll throw it away. I have no control over her attitude." True, you have no control over your ex's attitude, but you may have some influence.

"Don't get personal, seek the win/win solution, and stick to discussing the kids."

Years ago I wrote An Open Letter to Parents Who Are Divorced that appears at the beginning of this booklet . It was designed to remind parents of their vital role and invite ex-spouses to consider how they might better cooperate. I had no idea how useful and productive the letter would be to angry, fiery co-parents.

Secure a second copy of this booklet or a copy of my book, The Smart Stepfamily (if the children have a stepparent in either household) and send it to your ex-spouse. Perhaps the material will inspire them toward better cooperation as well.

Be Business-Like if Necessary.

Many co-parents have learned how to handle difficult ex-spouse relationships. Some use note cards while speaking on the phone to help keep them on task. Others avoid personal contact altogether relying on answering machines, letters, and email. No matter what your avenue of communication, treat the contact as you would a business deal. Don't get personal, seek the win/win solution, and stick to discussing the kids. Having a business mentality may help you to avoid being sidetracked when your buttons get pushed.

For example, one good business principle that applies in many circumstances is trying to find the common ground. Whenever possible agree with some aspect of what your ex is saying even if you disagree with the main point. *"You're right, every teenager wants the independence a car provides;*

I'm just wondering if he should be rewarded with one right now given his poor grades." If you can't "close the deal" because of personal pain or attacks, politely take a time-out from negotiations. Return to the table later when you have gathered yourself.

Be Prepared by Borrowing a Script and Sticking to It.

Patricia Papernow has designed some scripts to help co-parents deal with one another and the differences between their homes in a constructive manner.¹⁹

Before calling your ex, for example, have a written script in your hands to guide your responses. This will help you manage yourself during the conversation. Here are some of Dr. Papernow's scripts to help you communicate:

"Don't respond to the accusation; get to a behavioral solution."

1. Letting the bullet bounce.

After answering the phone you hear your ex say:

"I can't believe you forgot to send Jennifer's Halloween costume, we're going to be late, she's crying and once again you are irresponsible! When are you going to grow up?"

Your response:

[Take a deep breath and gather yourself] *"I know it's a pain. I'm sorry. Do you want me to bring it over or do you want to pick it up?"*

Note: I call this letting the bullet bounce because your ex is attacking you and if you let the bullet penetrate, you will react defensively. Putting on thick skin is a premium in stepfamilies. Don't respond to the accusation; get to a

behavioral solution. And next time remember to send the Halloween costume.

2. Mom's House Rules/ Dad's House Rules

Your new spouse says to your son:

"Homework before watching TV."

He says:

"Dad lets me watch TV before doing my homework."

Take a deep breathe and say:

"That may be true in your dad's house. And in this house, the rule is homework before TV."

"It's okay to have differing rules and expectations. The temptation is to argue with dad's rules..."

Note: It's okay to have differing rules and expectations. The temptation is to argue with dad's rule or judge his motives (*"That's because your dad likes to*

watch TV all the time himself.") Don't worry about dad's rule. Stick to yours. Also, notice the use of the word "and" instead of "but". The latter creates defensiveness; "and" is much more conciliatory.

3. The "Looking for Information" Phone Call

Sometimes situations like the one above require further information from the other parent. The biological parent should make the call; how you make that call is important to maintaining a cooperative relationship.

If you call and say the following, you are igniting a battle:

"I can't believe you let Johnny watch TV before doing his homework."

Rather call and say:

"Hi. I'm calling for some information. Johnny and I had a little run-in and he says that in your house it's okay to watch TV before getting his homework done. I'm wondering if that's true or if he's trying to get away with something."

"...it is likely that arguing is not going to convince the other parent to change (has it ever worked before?)."

If you are Cooperative
Colleagues the response may sound like this:

"Yeah. I figure he needs to unwind a little bit after basketball practice."

You say:

"Okay. I can understand that. That's what I needed to know. Thank you." [Hang up]

If you are Angry Associates the response may sound like this:

"He comes home tired from basketball practice and he's just a kid. Why should he have to do it anyway --homework isn't that important right now."

You say:

[Take a deep breath] *"Okay. Thank you."* [Hang up]

Note: This second response is by far the most difficult. However, it is likely that arguing is not going to convince the other parent to change (has it ever worked before?) and you don't need to try and control them anyway. You got the information you were seeking and it wasn't pretty. Hang up and work with your son within your home.
Say to your son:

"Moms and dads are different. I have lots of rules about chores in the house, your father has more rules about manners at the table. I'm concerned about your grades and wonder what you can do here to improve them. [Discuss the possibilities.] "What might you do while in your dad's house to get your homework done?"

4. Off the Hook and Out of the Middle.

Parents can sometimes tell when kids are getting caught in negative battles between adults. However, many times children themselves are not aware of a loyalty bind nor can

"...many times children themselves are not aware of a loyalty bind nor can they articulate it. "

they articulate it, so parents may not know their child is caught. Here are some possible ways to respond when you notice your child in the tug-of-war.

To your children:

"It seems to be that you are kind of caught in the middle between your mother and I. I know that is a tough place to be. I'm wondering how you feel about it?" [Listen and affirm] "When do you feel stuck the most? I'm sorry you have to hear negative things. "

"I want you to know if you hear me say something about the other home that makes you feel bad you can ask me to stop. And you can ask your mom to stop, too. If not, you'll be in a bad spot between us. Do you want to talk about it?" [Listen and validate feelings]

"By the way, I know you know this but you have my permission to love your mom and respect or love your step-dad. That's important for you and I'm okay with it."

If your child responds:

"Come on, Dad. You know Mom won't stop even if I ask her to. Once she gets started, she can't stop."

Reply by saying:

"You may be right. But I think it's worth saying out loud to her that it makes you feel bad."

To your ex-spouse:

"I know you would never mean to hurt the kids. But your comments like [give specific examples] are putting them between us. Please stop. I'm learning to not say negative things in front of the kids and I hope you will do the same. Thank you for your time."

Note: If your ex isn't convinced that negative comments hurt the children, don't try to defend yourself to the children. That only forces them into the middle again. The children will form their own opinions as they grow and tend to finally respect the parent who managed their tongue .

5. Reconnecting.

When non-custodial parents have been disconnected from their children for an extended period of time many wounds are created. If you have been absent from your child's life and now want to reconnect, understand it won't be easy. As children grow into adolescence and adulthood they can develop emotional walls that have protected them from feeling your rejection.

"Once you have stated your desire to reconnect, don't make it tough for kids to reach back and find you waiting. "

Your ex-spouse may have great anger toward you for disappointing the children and being unavailable to help raise them. Consider the following script as you hope to reconnect.

Communicate to your ex-spouse:

"I apologize for not being involved like I should have been. I have cheated you and our children out of a great deal. I'm sorry. I am hoping to reconnect with the kids but will not force myself on them. I will just let them know I'm changing and they can contact me when they are ready."

Write a letter to your child:

"I know this is tough to hear from me after I've been away for so long. I can see you are loyal to your mother right now. That is as it should be. Sometime I hope things change enough that you feel you can reconnect with me. I love you. When you're ready to call, I'll be happy to talk to you."

Note: Once you have stated your desire to reconnect don't make it tough for kids to reach back and find you waiting. Send birthday and holiday gifts with short, friendly messages. Don't induce guilt by saying, "Happy birthday. Why haven't you called?" Short emails can also help you stay at a safe distance until your children decide to step closer.

6. Reconnecting Following Blocked Relationships.

Unfortunately, parents are sometimes prohibited from seeing their children because their ex-spouse has cut off



contact between them. Children are confused by all the mixed messages and often hesitant about reconnecting.

Say to your child:

"I know we haven't been able to have any contact for some time. I know your mom said

a lot of bad things about me. I am not sure why she did that. Sometimes when people are in pain it is hard for them to do the right thing. You and I are going to have a lot of sorting out to do.

I hope, as you are ready, that you'll ask me about the things she said. I will tell you honestly which ones are true and which ones are not. Sometimes I think we will both be really sad or mad about the time we have missed together. I hope you'll talk to me when you feel that way. Meanwhile, I'm really glad we're talking again."

Get Connected With A Local Community

One of the biggest challenges faced by parents after divorce is communicating and cooperating for the benefit of their children --especially when communication is often hostile or strained. It can be an overwhelming task for divorced parents to effectively manage their needs during the healing process while trying to focus on their children.



CommonSteps™ is a Web site that brings awareness and shows families how to get connected with local groups that help them heal from divorce. It provides low-cost support services and classes that affect everything that they are going through during this difficult time. With CommonSteps™ you have access to:

Classes -- find locations and times for classes to help with relationships, marriage, children, finances and much more.

Literature -- read hundreds of articles on topics of interest to you and your family such as parenting, single moms, saving your marriage and workplace issues.

Support -- connecting to local support resources such as churches, therapists, counselors and workshops to get you and your kids back on track.

For more information about connecting with local resources go to www.commonsteps.org or call **CommonSteps** at **(512) 337-6125** to talk about your needs.

Study

Take time to learn how to live your new life. If your children have a stepparent in either household or you are planning remarriage, visit

www.SuccessfulStepfamilies.com

This Web site offers free articles that can improve your marriage, parenting, and between home co-parenting.

Develop An Action Plan.

Use the questions on the following pages to help you articulate up to five key areas that need improvement. Then, make an intentional effort to put them to work.

Questions For All Couples

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 rate your co-parental relationship on your ability to contain anger and conflict in order to cooperate and compromise on issues regarding the children's welfare.

2. List two or three things you might do to improve this rating.

3. During the first year after remarriage disruptions in the visitation schedule can be quite problematic for children. Regularity of contact is critical to children's self-esteem and reduces more feelings of loss. When a remarriage takes place the visitation routine is often disturbed. Indeed, fathers on average drop their visits to non-custodial children by half within the first year of their ex-wife's remarriage.

What disruptions in access to both parents have your children experienced? What can you do to improve the access and regularity (predictability) of this contact?

4. Consider whether your children have your permission to care for others in their two homes. If not, what needs to change within you in order to grant that permission?

5. What fears do you have about losing touch with your teenagers? If they wanted to live in the other home, how would you react?

6. Review the Guidelines for Co-Parents section and create a checklist of items you need to develop or work toward. Affirm yourself and your ex for the things you are currently doing well.

7. Consider each point in Helping the Children Thrive Between Homes. Which have you already implemented and which could you adopt now?

8. On a scale of 1-10 how well are you able to compartmentalize old marital issues from current co-parental ones? What triggers are you most susceptible to?

9. Share some of the forgiveness issues you have had to face or are currently struggling to release.

10. Which scripts might be helpful to you in the future? Why?

Questions for Pre-Remarital Couples

1. Openly discuss your present co-parent relationships. How cooperative have you been in the past with your ex? What issues are problematic? How well are you able to contain your anger and responses with your children's other parent?

2. What are your hopes regarding how quickly your children will accept their new stepparent? What do you think reality is?

3. We highly recommend you get a copy of, "The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family," There are critical aspects of stepfamily integration that you must understand in order to build a successful stepfamily.

Visit your local bookstore, or go to:
www.commonsteps.org to start some healthy planning and better organization to reduce stress on you and your new family.

Consider Your Child(ren)

Make a list on the left side of unhealthy co-parenting patterns. On the right, list your new plan and how you will respond.

Ways I put my child(ren) in an emotional tug-of-war:

Unhealthy Burden

My New Plan

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

5.

5.

Expectations put on my child(ren) to take care of me or others:

Unhealthy Burden

My New Plan

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

5.

5.

Children's Bill of Rights

Marriage is a contract between adults, and when it ends, the matter is between the adults also. Yet no parental action has a greater impact on children. Children love their parents and want to be with them. Even in times of great stress, parents have a responsibility to conduct their legal affairs in a manner that will protect their children from adult conflicts.

At a minimum, children are entitled to the following Bill of Rights:

1. Neither parent shall deny the child reasonable use of the telephone to place and receive calls with the other parent and relatives.
2. Neither parent shall speak or write derogatory remarks about the other parent to the child, or engage in abusive, coarse or foul language, which can be overheard by the child whether or not the language involves the other parent.
3. Neither parent shall permit the children to overhear arguments, negotiations or other substantive discussions about legal or business dealings between the parents.
4. Neither parent shall physically or psychologically attempt to pressure, attempt to influence, pressure or influence the children concerning the personal opinion or position of the child concerning legal proceedings between the parents.
5. Each parent will permit the child to display photographs of the other parent or both parents in the child's room.
6. Neither parent shall communicate moral judgments about the other parent to the child concerning the other parent's choice of values, lifestyle, choice of friends, successes or failures in life (career, financial, relational) or residential choice.

7. The parents will acknowledge to the child that the child has two homes although the child may spend more time at one home than the other.
8. The parents shall cooperate to the greatest extent practicable in sharing time with the child.
9. Each parent will permit the child to retain, and allow easy access to, correspondence, greeting cards, and other written materials received from the other parent.
10. Each parent will respect the physical integrity of items possessed by the child which depict the other parent or remind the child of the other parent.
11. Neither parent will trivialize, or deny the existence of the other parent to the child.
12. Neither parent will interrogate the child about the other parent nor will either parent discourage comments by the child about the other parent.
13. Neither parent will intercept, "lose", derail, "forget" or otherwise interfere with communications to the child from the other parent.
14. Neither parent will refuse to acknowledge that the child can have or should have good experiences with the other parent.
15. Neither parent will directly or indirectly attack or criticize to the child the extended family of the other parent, the other parent's career, the living and travel arrangements of the other parent, or lawful activities of the other parent or associates of the other parent.
16. Neither parent will use the child as a "middleman" by using the child to communicate with the other parent on inappropriate topics.

17. Neither parent will undermine the other parent in the eyes of the child by engaging in the “circumstantial syndrome” which is done by manipulating, changing, or rearranging facts.
18. Neither parent will create for, or exaggerate to, the child differences between the parents.
19. Neither parent will say and do things with an eye to gaining the child as an “ally” against the other parent.
20. Neither parent will encourage or instruct the child to be disobedient to the other parent, stepparents, or relatives.
21. Neither parent will reward the child to act negatively toward the other parent.
22. Neither parent will try to make the child believe he or she loves the child more than the other parent, by, for example, saying that he or she loves the child more than the other parent or over-informing the child on adult topics or overindulging the child.
23. Neither parent will discuss child support issues with the child.
24. Neither parent will engage in judgmental, opinionated or negative commentary, physical inspections or interrogations once the child arrives from his/her other home.
25. Neither parent will “rewrite” or “re-script” facts which the child originally knows to be different.
26. Neither parent will punish the child physically or threaten such punishment in order to influence the child to adopt the parent’s negative program, if any, against the other parent.

27. Neither parent will permit the child to be transported by a person who is intoxicated due to consumption of alcohol or illegal drugs.
28. Neither parent will smoke tobacco materials inside structures or vehicles occupied at the time by the child.
29. Each parent will permit the child to carry gifts, toys, clothing, and other items belonging to the child with him or her to the residence of the other parent or relatives or permit the child to take gifts, toys, clothing, and other items belonging to the child back to the residence of the other parent, as the case may be, to facilitate the child having with him or her objects, important to the child. The gifts, toys, clothing and other items belonging to the child referred to here mean items which are reasonable transportable and does not include pets (which the parents agree are impractical to move about).

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For more CommonSteps™ resources to help your family go to:

www.commonsteps.org



1. Register to get connected to a local network.

CommonSteps™ is a Web site that provides low-cost support services and classes that affects everything that they are going through during this difficult time.

Members have access to:

Classes -- find locations and times for helpful courses covering topics such as divorce, separation, dating, marriage, children and families.

Literature -- read hundreds of articles on topics of interest to you and your family such as parenting, single moms, saving your marriage and workplace issues.

Support -- connecting to local support resources such as churches, therapists, counselors and workshops to get you and your kids back on track.

For more information, go to www.commonsteps.org or call **CommonSteps** at (512) 337-6125.

2. Order your copy of:

"The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family,"



What the experts are saying:

"The best book available for stepfamilies."--Dennis Rainey, Executive Director, Family Life Ministries

"I love this book!"--Marjorie Engle, PhD., President and CEO, Stepfamily Association of America

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