

## **THE 10 BEST PARENTING PRACTICES AND 10 PITFALLS TO AVOID DURING A COURT CASE CONCERNING YOUR CHILD**

**\*\*\*\*\*DON'T BAD MOUTH THE OTHER PARENT\*\*\*\*\***  
**Disparaging the other parent is disparaging your child.**



### **THE 10 BEST**

**1. PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS AT THIS TIME.** Your child is grieving, and he needs be listened to and helped with his feelings as you go through your family break up. We know that most of you are experiencing severe pain as you deal with your new relationship status and legal issues. As hard as it is for you, please remember that it's much harder for your child who doesn't have the adult coping skills for dealing with it that you do. Also remember that transitioning between two homes is stressful for children. Your child needs extra attention and affection during this time and help understanding his feelings. There are resources in your community to help you deal with your feelings and also help you deal with your child's feelings, too.

**2. BOTH PARENTS SHOULD SIT DOWN TOGETHER AND TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE BREAK UP.** (If you didn't talk to your kids about it together, it's never too late as long as the two of you can do it in a calm, nurturing, conflict-free manner.) Talk to them using age appropriate language which means to talk to them in words that they can understand at their age and stage of development. Assure your children that both of their parents will ALWAYS love them and make sure they know that the divorce is not their fault. You may think that your co-parent doesn't spend as much time with your kids as you think they should or that the quality of their parenting should be better. However, remember that your child is half of both of you, and that when you talk to your child about your co-parent, you are talking to your child about the part of them that came from his other parent.

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**3. SHOW YOUR CHILD WHERE YOU ARE LIVING BEFORE THEY HAVE PARENTING TIME WITH YOU.** Advance visits will ease this transition for your kids.

**“THE GREATEST GIFT YOU CAN GIVE YOUR CHILDREN IS PERMISSION TO LOVE THE OTHER PARENT.”** – Brenda “Sunni” Ball

**4. IT’S IMPORTANT FOR YOUR CHILD TO LOVE BOTH PARENTS SO PROMOTE THE OTHER PARENT ACTIVELY!** It’s important for your child to spend time with both parents. Do everything possible to make sure that both parents are available to your child. When violence or abuse exists, actively work to set up arrangements for visits with your co-parent supervised either by trusted friends or relatives or through therapeutic supervision. Remember that your child loves you both regardless of how you feel about the other parent.

**5. KEEP YOUR KIDS’ SCHOOL, ROUTINES, AND ACTIVITIES AS STABLE AS POSSIBLE.** Maintaining their normal routines minimizes the amount of change when they are dealing with huge emotional losses. When you and your co-parent are able to attend some functions together on behalf of your child (parent-teacher school conferences for example) in a friendly fashion, your child will benefit tremendously from seeing the two of you being able to continue to get along in spite of your break up. Kids benefit from both parents supporting your kids’ activities. Kids benefit when both parents agree on the selection of and payment for your children’s activities and when both parents participate in their activities. Work with the other parent's schedule for transportation and parental attendance at games, concerts, lessons, church, and school extra-curricular activities. Both parents should advise one another of all contact information for all of the children’s physicians, dentists, schools, extra-curricular activities, and all other service providers and share information regarding your child that is sent home from school or that you receive from other sources in a timely manner.

**6. TALK DIRECTLY TO YOUR CO-PARENT ABOUT ADULT ISSUES AND ALL ISSUES REGARDING THE COURT PROCEEDINGS.** Set a time once a week with no distractions to communicate with your co-parent about your children. Talking is the best way to accomplish this task, but Skype or e-mail are alternatives. Kids benefit when parents work together to keep the rules for the kids, household routines, bedtimes, chores, discipline and positive re-enforcement the same between both your homes.

**7. CONFLICT FREE PARENTING TIME TRANSITIONS BENEFIT YOUR CHILDREN.** For children, parenting time exchanges tend to be the most difficult part of their new routines due to the tension between their parents and the fighting or name calling that can go on during the exchanges. If you and your co-parent cannot exchange your child in a calm business-like manner, then set up your exchanges so that you and your co-parent don’t see one another. These types of exchanges can be set up at daycare, school, extra-curricular activities or by having one of your family members do the exchange for you. Use police stations for exchanges only as a last resort.

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**8. YOUR CHILD BENEFITS WHEN BOTH PARENTS PARTICIPATE IN THE SELECTION OF A THERAPIST FOR YOUR CHILD, DETERMINING THE TYPE OF THERAPY YOUR CHILD NEEDS, SHARING THE TRANSPORTATION OF YOUR CHILD TO THERAPY, AND PARTICIPATING IN THE THERAPY AS REQUESTED BY THE THERAPIST .** If you have already chosen the therapist and your child has already started therapy, then provide the other parent with the name, address, and phone number of the therapist, ask them to contact the therapist to provide input to the therapist, and to participate in the therapy if requested to do so by the therapist. If your child is in therapy, remember that therapy is your child's safe emotional place. Do everything you can to keep Court proceedings from intruding on your child's relationship with their therapist. Encourage your child to talk to the therapist about whatever is on their heart and what they are feeling. Do allow your child to have a confidential relationship with their therapist in order to build a safe and trusting relationship.

**9. EDUCATE YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR CO-PARENT IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE.** When people care about you, they don't want to see you hurt, and may become emotionally over-involved in your break-up. Make sure that you, your friends and family members are not talking about the legal proceedings in front of your kids and that you're not talking badly about your co-parent in front of your kids.

**10. IF YOU HAVE AN ATTORNEY, PARTNER WITH YOUR ATTORNEY TO MANAGE THE LEVEL OF CONFLICT IN YOUR CASE.** The best thing for your child is to keep conflict low between you and the child's other parent. When the Court case becomes intense, children can feel it even if the parents are doing a good job of not talking about the legal proceedings in front of them. You can tell your attorney to calm down and that you want to conduct the case in as civil and respectful a manner as possible. A positive by-product of less conflict is that it usually results in lower attorney fees. When the Court case intensifies, parents tend to regress to old unhealthy ways of relating to one another becoming more self-focused which tends to reduce the emotional support they have available to give to their children.



## **10 PITFALLS TO AVOID**

**1. TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE COURT PROCEEDINGS IS DESTRUCTIVE TO YOUR CHILD.** Avoid talking to your child about the Court proceedings or about your co-parent in the presence of your child. In the presence of your child means in their vicinity or within earshot of them. Your children want to know something about what's going on. (See No. 2 in Best Practices.) Kids in divorces develop radar screens for ears and turn into the BEST private investigators. These days kids have excellent electronics skills! Your child doesn't need to know the details of the legal proceedings, the details of your break up with your co-parent or the reasons for it. Shielding them from the conflict between you and your co-parent is VERY important. Even if your co-parent is not able to keep quiet about you or the break up in

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front of your child, it remains important for you not to burden your child even more. When you talk to your children about your co-parent, you are leaning on your child emotionally to meet your own needs. You need to be there emotionally for your kids; not the other way around.

**2. IT IS INAPPROPRIATE AND HARMFUL TO YOUR CHILD TO TALK TO THEM ABOUT YOUR NEW FINANCIAL SITUATION.** Examples are telling your children how you would be able to afford things if your co-parent was paying you what s/he should be or telling your kids if your co-parent isn't paying child support. Saying these things can only make your child feel anxious because it threatens their stability. Financial issues are adult issues which need to be dealt with directly with your co-parent. If you have e-mail, e-mail is a very good way to communicate with your co-parent. You are trying to develop a business-like method of communication with your child's other parent so that you are able to effectively co-parent. Using written communication allows you to verify arrangements in writing and avoid instances of miscommunication and misunderstandings that can happen in the emotionally charged conversations that often exist during the early phases of relationship separations. If you are able to make decisions about money, write down your agreements. In e-mails concerning your kids, avoid talking about your feelings about the divorce. Avoid using the e-mails to criticize your co-parent or blame them for the divorce. Keep the e-mails specific to sharing information about your kids and making decisions for your kids.

**3. AVOID TELLING YOUR CHILD THAT THEY HAVE A VOICE IN THE LEGAL PROCEEDINGS.** Children have a RIGHT to never have to choose between their parents. They do NOT have a direct voice in Court except through another professional. There is NO age in Colorado at which they can decide which parent they want to live with.

**4. AVOID GIVING UP ON DISCIPLINING YOUR CHILD BECAUSE YOU WANT THEM TO LOVE YOU MORE THAN YOUR CO-PARENT.** Also, avoid overindulging your kids with fancy trips and gifts that are out of the ordinary for your usual lifestyle. (We're not talking about a fun trip to help deal with the intensity of the break up and to help build a new separated family unit with you and your kids.) Most likely, your children are already feeling as if they are in the middle of a situation in which they have lost control, and failure to set limits for them will only add to their feeling of being out of control.

**5. AVOID CRITICIZING YOUR KIDS WHEN THEY SEEM TO BE RETURNING TO BEHAVIORS OF A YOUNGER AGE.** When kids experience emotional distress, it is common for them to regress to behaviors that they appeared to have already grown out of. If you see old behaviors starting to surface, be patient with them, talk to them about what they are feeling, and understand it is because of the emotional turmoil they are experiencing. If they do not seem to be making emotional progress over time, it would be a good idea to take them to a therapist for a "well check." (See No. 8. in Best Practices.)

**6. AVOID INTRODUCING YOUR CHILD TO YOUR NEW DATES OR TO A NEW PARTNER WITH WHOM YOU ARE BECOMING SERIOUS TOO SOON.** Understand that just because you're ready to move on doesn't mean that your child is ready to move. Children grieve differently than adults do. Remember that your child is grieving even if you're not. Kids harbor hopes that their parents will get back together, and these hopes can linger even

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after both parents are seriously involved with new partners. Children need time to grieve the loss of their parents being together, and it will probably take longer for them to get through it than it will for you as an adult to grieve the loss. Kids emotionally attach to your new relationships so exposing your children to new relationships can stunt your child's emotional growth by:

- feeling like they are betraying their other parent,
- conflicted loyalties between their other parent, you, and your new relationship,
- experiencing yet another loss if your new relationship doesn't work out,
- loss of their ability to trust in relationships, and
- your child's needs not being met because you are so focused on your new relationship.

**7. AVOID TELLING YOUR KIDS THAT YOUR PARTNER IS THEIR “NEW MOM OR DAD.”** Your co-parent will always be the child's mother or father, and children should NEVER be required to call a new partner “Mother or Father.” If your child starts that on their own, your child may just be confused or not know what else to call the new partner. You should remind your child that your co-parent is their actual parent. If calling your co-parent's new partner “Mom or Dad” comes naturally to your child, however, try to just let it be. New partners should always respect that the biological parents are the child's parents, and they are primarily responsible for parenting decisions and co-parenting. The new significant other should continuously be careful about not over-stepping too far into the parenting roles that belong to the biological parents.

**8. AVOID USING YOUR CHILD AS A SPY TO FIND OUT WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR CO-PARENT'S LIFE.** Examples of using your child as a spy are:

- asking your child if your co-parent got a raise,
- asking your child how much time your co-parent is spending with your kids while they are with your co-parent,
- asking your child whether or not your co-parent is having another adult spend the night in their room with them,
- sending either verbal or written messages to your co-parent through your child, or
- asking your child about any other issue that you should be communicating directly with your co-parent about. These are all adult issues to be dealt with adult to adult. Burdening your child with these issues can cause them to grow up too quickly becoming what is called a “parentified child.”

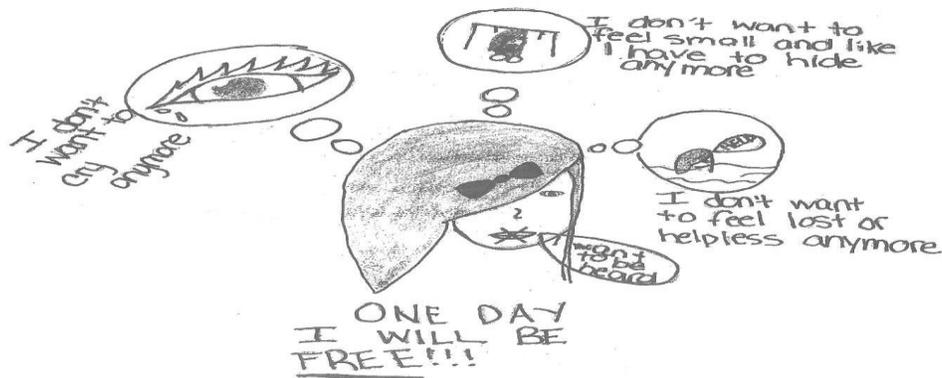
**9. AVOID DELEGATING TOO MUCH RESPONSIBILITY FOR BABYSITTING YOUNGER KIDS OR FOR HOUSEHOLD CHORES TO YOUR CHILD.** When you transition into a one parent household, it can definitely be a challenge handling all the responsibilities by yourself that you used to have a partner to help you with. Kids benefit from age appropriate responsibility for household chores, but putting too much responsibility on them in the wake of the break-up can interfere with the emotional space they need to heal from the family break up. Don't expect them to take on all the chores that your co-parent used to do. They need time to play and attend themselves to the tasks of their own emotional development.

**10. AVOID ALLOWING YOUR CHILD TO PLAY ONE PARENT AGAINST THE OTHER.** If you are not communicating with your co-parent, you cannot know whether or not your child is accurately reporting to you what is going on between your children and their other parent. Kids need limits set on the amount of power they have in the family, and not talking with your other parent can allow your children too obtain more power than they should have. Check out what your child is telling you about the other parent with the other parent. Just like when you and your former partner were still together, your kids may tell you that Mom said it was OK, when she actually didn't.

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**ARTWORK DRAWN BY A CHILD CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE  
OF HER PARENTS' COURT CASE**



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