

Conflict between divorced spouses can color the way a child perceives himself and affect the way he interacts with others

CO-PARENTS, STOP FIGHTING!

By ANNE-LOUISE DePALO

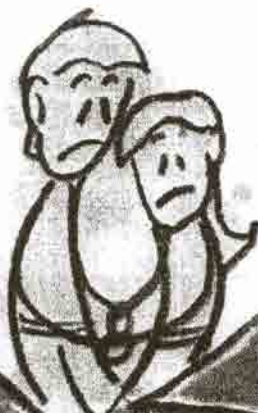
You have received your final judgment of divorce. Perhaps you battled in court, spent thousands of dollars in attorney's fees and dealt with the emotional trauma of separating.

Now you breathe a sigh of relief and think to yourself, "It's finally over."

However, if you have children, it is not over as you must maintain contact and a relationship with your ex. Although the marital relationship has ended, the relationship as parents continues.

Parental functioning, and the ability of divorcing

SEE CO-PARENTS, PAGE C 5



It's crucial for divorcing parents to maintain good relations

parents to interact with each other, greatly influence a child's adjustment during this **difficult transition**. In fact, parental interaction characterized by hostility and conflict is the single most common cause of poor adjustment in children following a divorce, as psychologist Judith S. Wallerstein notes in "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce."

Aldo Fossella, a psychotherapist with a private practice in Oakwood, agrees. "Parental conflict has a detrimental effect, not only on a child's development," he noted, "but also on their ability to sustain lasting and healthy relationships as adults."

"It is very important that parents understand how speaking negatively about the other damages a child," Dr. Sara L. Weiss says, adding that Mom and Dad's behavior can color the way a child views himself. since he sees **himself** as a part of them.

When it comes to **co-parenting**, divorced parents need to **emphasize collaboration** and a focus on the children," explains Dr. Weiss, who is the director of Heartland Psychological in New Springville. "Parents need to accept their partner may not parent exactly as they do, but each parent has their own **strengths and contributions** to give to the child"

Stability and consistency in parenting are very important in raising healthy and well-adjusted children. Fossella explains that when parents **undermine** each other and are in

conflict, it builds anxiety and stress in the children, which can lead to future behavioral and adjustment problems.

"During a custody battle, the **parents often become polarized** and are so concerned with **making** the other parent look ineffective that they deliberately refuse to help or cooperate with the other parent — to the detriment of the children," explains Brian O'Halloran, an attorney with a family law practice in Sunnyside.

Gerard Squillaro is in the midst of a divorce. The Great Kills resident wishes he and his wife could communicate effectively and maintain a more congenial relationship.

"Right now we text message each other even though we live in the same house; and when I suggested we attend the **first day** of school together, she became **angry** and refused."

One of the best gifts you can give your children is to spare them from conflict and **bickering** with your ex. They should be a model for successful communication by **co-parenting**, which as O'Halloran explains, "means each parent shares in the obligations, decisions and responsibilities of child rearing, as well as enjoying quality time with the children."

PARENT COORDINATORS

Co-parenting is a difficult endeavor, so much so, it often requires the assistance of a professional. A recent innovation in the divorce courts and the world of psychology is the

use of parent coordinators, who are used to manage **high-conflict** custody and **visitation** cases.

"Parent coordinators are best used after a **final** parenting plan is approved by the court," O'Halloran explains.

The coordinator helps parents follow the terms of the agreement and makes suggestions if circumstances **change** — for example, if as a **child** gets older, his activities interfere with a parent's scheduled visitations or if one of the parents decides to relocate.

"If the parties can agree to certain changes," O'Halloran explains, "then there is no need for court intervention and costly litigation."

A parent coordinator herself, Dr. Weiss says her role "is to educate parents about putting the needs of their children first and teach **appropriate skills** and behavior techniques to **co-parent**."

An example of what she and other parent coordinators do, she continues, "might be setting up certain guidelines such as neither party speaking in a derogatory matter about the other party, or setting up a communication system through e-mails."

Parent coordinators are **often mental health professionals**; some family law attorneys may qualify as well. The court usually maintains a list of professional parent coordinators; however, if you are in need of a referral, it is best to ask your attorney.

Though a parent coordina-



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tor must have experience and education in **child development** as well as mediation, he is not a therapist, Dr. Weiss notes, and she recommends **that parents** see their own **individual** therapist to deal with any lingering issues of resentment, anger, attachment and ambivalence toward their ex.

In addition, a **parent coordinator** is **useful** in dealing with co-parenting of children with disabilities, **remarriage** of a spouse, extended **family conflicts**, elective surgery, religious training, extracurricular activities, choice of schools, special events such as a sweet 16 or bar mitzvah parties and dealing with a

child who has **special** needs.

It is clear **that** spouses or partners must emotionally detach from each other and **develop** a **relationship** built **solely** on the **principle** of addressing the needs of the children. Parents must be clear about how much parenting **they will share** and what they **will accomplish** on their own when the children are living with them. A parent coordinator attempts to educate the parents and give structure and stability to the child.

BATTLE OVER VISITATION

Kelly Yeugelowitz of Totterville has been divorced for a year and was recently **brought** back to court by her ex **who** is seeking additional week day **overnight** visitation.

"I tried to **make** him understand I want him to have a close relationship with the children and spend time with them," she says, adding that the children's lives become **very** disrupted with two **overnight visits**.

She explains, "We recently moved and they want to be able to stay in the neighborhood and play with their friends."

The **best way** to get along, Fossella **recommends**, is to "treat your ex with **kindness**." This is easy to say, but perhaps not so easy to do.

However, when parents focus on blame and remain angry, they often become **vindictive** and unable to practice compassion or kindness. Being a good parent is about putting your children **first**, rather than your own personal needs.

Philip A. Garippa, a **board-certified** diplomate individual, marital and sex therapist in Oakwood, states, "Divorcing couples must learn to separate their **parenting interaction** from their **feelings** and interactions as former **spouses** or partners. **Despite** the pain of separating, they must let **go** of the marital relationship in order to thrive as individuals and move on with their lives.

"The pain and fear of letting go can be so great for some people that they **put** all their energies into **staying attached** to the **relationship**," he continues. "A couple engaged in revenge takes action not because it is best for their child but often to inflict emotional pain on the other parent. Unfortunately the children are caught in the middle."

Garippa suggests a very useful technique as a guide, which he calls the "Reasonableness Test." If, for example, a **question** arises about your **child**, or a request comes from your ex regarding a change in scheduling, then take a step back. Pretend it is not your ex, nor your child, but instead the neighbor's. Ask yourself "Is it reasonable?" and "What would truly be best for the child?"

New Dorp resident, and divorcee, Ellen Holt concurs: "If you remain civil, are nice and think of your children, you will save a ton of money and a **lot** of heartache."

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