

Is it Worth Giving Up the Anger and Blame to Give Your Child a Better Chance for Happiness and Success in Life?

EXCERPTED FROM
COOPERATIVE PARENTING AND DIVORCE
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IS IT WORTH GIVING UP ANGER AND BLAME TO GIVE YOUR CHILD A BETTER CHANCE FOR HAPPINESS AND SUCCESS IN LIFE?

*Excerpted from Cooperative Parenting and Divorce
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You have the power to influence your child's well-being either positively or negatively. In fact, the only individuals who have this power are the same individuals that feel the anger and the blame. Either singularly or together, you can make a commitment to alter the amount of conflict in your child's life. No one can do it for you. No one can make you. You have to individually decide if you want to alter the pattern of tension and hostility that surrounds your child and interferes with his or her happiness.

You might be thinking "*if only the other parent would change, things could be better right away*".

The flaw with this thinking is that when the other person suffers from Borderline Personality Disorder, they often don't know how to solve these things on their own. So this way of thinking leaves us right back to where we started. It's like the old saying, "*insanity is when you keep doing the same thing but expect a different result*".

The only way you'll get something better for your child is if you do something different.

HOW CONFLICT HURTS

A discussion of parental conflict hurting the child may seem confusing, after all, the conflict occurs between the parents, not between the parent and the child.

How can parental conflict hurt the child?

To understand how this happens, we need to understand the developmental influences on children. The following anecdotes will hopefully set the stage for this understanding.

Conflict diminishes the Parents Role as "Protector"

Rachel and her father, Robert, had planned a fun weekend together. When Robert gets to the house where Rachel and her mother Jackie live, Jackie immediately confronts him about her overdue support check. The confrontation quickly turns into an attack

and counterattack, as Jackie and Robert volley verbal arrows at one another. As the voices reach a crescendo, Rachel manages to "hurt herself" drawing their attention back to her.

What these parents don't see is the systematic damage they are doing to one of the most important parental functions; that of "protector." When children are young, the intensity of their own feelings can frighten them. They run screaming to mommy or daddy when they skin a knee or face monsters in the dark. Mommy or daddy, calm their fears and soothe their anxieties, thus providing a kind of protection against real or imagined dangers.

Even into adulthood, well-adjusted individuals look to close family members when they're upset, welcoming the apparent reminder that "Everything will be all right." However, in divorces were the parents



exhibit intense hostility toward one another, the parents themselves are upset and out-of-control. They exhibit their own fears, anxieties and intense anger.

This is terribly unsettling to the child. If the parent acts like a child in managing their emotions and appears to require protection themselves, who will protect the child from all those dangers? Who will soothe and comfort and help him learn to handle his own anxieties? Who will provide the security net against real and imagined monsters if the parent is in need of protection too? When neither parent can perform that function, the child is laid open to extreme levels of anxiety and doubt. He can no longer count on the security of a firm foundation normally found in his birth family. It's hard for him to build his own confidence on a foundation of quicksand.

Conflict complicates the child's role identity

11-year-old Tonya arrives at her dad's house. James, her father, greets her "hey, you're right on time. Great! We can get to the gym before it gets too busy. Did you remember your bathing suit this time? Oh no, not again. You forgot again? We had planned to go tonight. Why can't you remember a single thing like that?" Disappointedly, he adds, "You're just like your mother."

What started out as a positive, shared time between father and daughter has suddenly changed into a disappointment for James

and an emotional quagmire for Tonya. By reminding Tonya that she's just like her mother in ways that he hates, James is not only criticizing Tonia, but threatening her self-esteem. After all, he divorced her mother because he didn't love her any more. Tania could interpret that message as *"I'm like my mother who's not worthy of love; therefore I am not worthy of love."* After all, the child is a product of the union of both parents and is therefore already like her mother in many ways. She's female, she has the characteristic of being forgetful, and may share other physical features or personality traits as well.

When James compares Tonya to her mother at a time when he's disapproving of her mother, he is in effect telling her that she is *"not good enough."* What will happen when Tonya approaches the next challenge and thinks to herself, *"I'm not good enough"?* She is likely to make a half-hearted attempt to meet the challenge, thereby dooming herself to failure and thus proving to herself that she's not, in fact, good enough.

A second problem for Tonya is her "role identity" with her mother. Tonya's mother is her first role model for how a female is supposed to act. If Tonya hears many messages of disapproval regarding her mother, she will become confused about how she is supposed to act in her female capacity. Should she act like her mother, her closest female role model, or should she not act like her mother in ways that demonstrate her gender? If she does, her father may disapprove, but if she doesn't, she is rejecting the female role model that is closest to her.

Conflict between parents fails to teach effective conflict resolution skills

(Promotes poor conflict resolution skills)

Sarah is fourteen. Her parents are discussing her upcoming vacation plans. Her father wants to leave on Thursday to catch an early flight to Florida. Sarah's mother fights the idea since officially the father's time with her doesn't start until 3:00 clock on Friday. The disagreement quickly escalates to a shouting match, with each side thrusting and jabbing at

any weakness in the other's character traits. When she can't stand it anymore, Sarah retreats to her room.

There's an old saying that goes, "Parents are a child's first teacher." If that is so, what are these parents teaching their kids?

First, how to turn a small difference of opinion into a major problem.

Second, to back every problem with an argument.

Third, how to turn a problem into a character assassination.

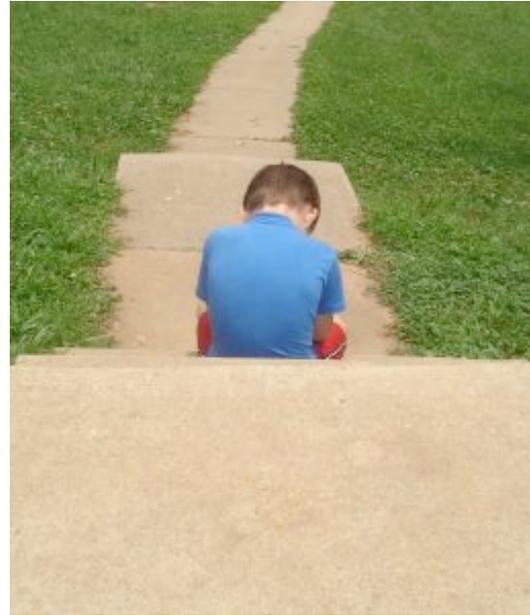
And forth, how to win at any cost.

If the teen learns from her role models, she too, can turn her own problems with people into opportunities for creating conflict. She too, can prevent "problems from finding solutions", and "negotiations from forming agreements."

Conflict threatens stability and increases fears of abandonment

Six-year-old Rachel excitedly waits for her daddy to arrive to pick her up. They're going to the zoo. Robert arrives five minutes early, Rachel's mother, Jackie, refuses to let Rachel leave, because officially, Roberts visitation hasn't started yet. That just pushes Robert's buttons and as he sits waiting he's fuming. When the appointed time finally comes, and Rachel still isn't coming out of the house, Robert calls and the parents exchange angry words on the phone. Rachel's mother says she's now enforcing her "anger" boundary and hangs up. Robert speeds away in his car as Rachel cries "Daddy, Daddy, I want my Daddy".

While the threat of violence is a real danger to the normal development of the child's personality, the fear of abandonment can be just as terrifying. Being left alone to fend for oneself is a deeply disturbing thought. Since they can't provide for themselves, children know instinctively that they're dependent on adults around them. They understand that



their survival depends on it. Therefore anything that threatens the stability of keeping the close adults in their lives threatens their emotional welfare at the most basic level.

Adults often use the phrase, "he's always there for me" when they're describing a close relationship. Even though they have the capacity to care for themselves, adults can also be uneasy about facing problems by themselves. So it shouldn't be surprising that the threat of being abandoned strikes terror in the heart of a child.

There's another dilemma here too, Rachel is frightened of being abandoned by her father but she's also angry at her mother for her role in the conflict. However, she doesn't dare show her anger because then mother could leave too. That puts her in the middle of a very frustrating situation. If she expresses her anger at her mother, it could hurt her more. If she doesn't get to express these negative feelings, the pressure could build until there's an explosion.

Conflict puts the child in a loyalty bind

Marcus has just opened his birthday gift from his father, Charles. It's a skateboard. Although it's the one thing he passionately wanted for his birthday, no



smile lights up his face. When his father, disappointed with his son's lack of enthusiasm inquires, Marcus reveals the reason for his sad face - his mother's firm refusal to allow her son to have a skateboard. She thinks they're unsafe and she has voiced this opinion to both Marcus and Charles.

Charles is furious at his former wife's interference and loudly proclaims to his son that he will not only keep the skateboard, but will proudly take it home with him and use it wherever he wants. This expression on Marcus's face is filled with anguish.

Whether they realize it or not, parents have a great influence on their children. Their values, beliefs, and standards all help a child set his own limits and influence his opinions. Children may argue, but they are usually loyal followers of parental rules and underlying values. What happens then, when divorced parents disagree vehemently and put their children in the middle of the fight? The child is placed in a huge loyalty bind. This forces the child to choose between one parent or the other. He's caught in the middle with no way out.

Whichever way he turns he's forced to make a decision which will turn one parent against him. He believes that he can't be loyal to both. The situation forces him to take action which he knows will only end up costing him pain.

What could be the long-term consequences? What happens if he gets used to choosing the side that causes him pain? He might choose the side of crime, of addiction, of promiscuity. After all, it's the pattern he was taught by his parents.

YOU'VE GOT THE POWER

If you're concerned about the long-term consequences of conflict on your own child, what can you do about it? Actually, there are a number of things. You have the power to influence your child's well-being, either positively or negatively. Parents are the only two individuals who have this power. Either singularly or together, you can make a commitment to alter the amount of conflict in your child's life. No one can do it for you. No one can make you. You have to individually decide if you want to alter the pattern of tension and hostility that surrounds your child and interferes with his or her happiness.

You might be thinking "that if only the BPD parent would change, things could be better right away." There is a problem with this way of thinking; it leaves us right back to where we are. It's like the old saying, "insanity is when you keep doing the same thing, but expect a different result". The only way you'll get something better for your child is if YOU do something different.

TAKE THE LEAD

In a way, relationships can be like dancing. If you lead, the other person has to follow. But will it be that easy? Not right away. If you've ever changed your steps in the middle of the dance you'll know at first there will be a lot of confusion and resistance while your partner tries to get you to go back to the way you were doing things. However, if you persist, he or she will pick up the new

method and will get in step with you once again.

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

It's a cliché but it's still true - when it comes to arguing, it takes two. One can't do it alone. If you're the one who takes your "sails" out of the other persons "wind", all the huffing and puffing done by the BPD parent won't blow you off course. Think about it - you control the interaction when you decide whether or not you're going to participate. We know our BPD partner isn't capable, so the question still remains *Are you ready to commit to taking the lead, to acting alone if necessary, to reduce the conflict if it's for the good of your child?*

WHAT STOPS YOU? WHAT'S THE COST?

You may still feel a twinge realizing something is holding you back. You have a suspicion that you may have to give up something in order to get something. (what is being given up?) Conflict has a high cost to both the parents and the child. The cost to the child is their sense of security, self-esteem, confidence, emotional control, happiness, normal personality development, and a range of other considerations. However, it may surprise you to learn that the conflict is also costly to parents in terms of the level of happiness, anxiety, discomfort, and a host of other disturbances which limit a full and productive life.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

It's important to realize that the parents benefit more from the conflict than the child. That, of course, is why parents keep arguing.

Which of the following benefits might be true for you?

- ✓ *The sense of power?*
- ✓ *The fun of competition?*
- ✓ *The satisfaction of revenge*

- ✓ *The pleasure of fighting to Win?*
- ✓ *The satisfaction of being right?*
- ✓ *The satisfaction of pleasure of blaming the BPD parent for the sad state of affairs?*
- ✓ *The convenience of not taking responsibility for your life?*
- ✓ *The war of playing who's the victim?*
- ✓ *The desire to stay connected to the co parent, even if it's only through conflict?*
- ✓ *The challenge, or even purpose in life?*
- ✓ *To avoid fear of change?*



WHAT'S THE COST FOR WORKING TOGETHER?

Both parents and children benefit from a cooperative parental relationship. Both receive the advantages of lower stress,

reduced anger, less tension and a more peaceful existence. While both parents and children receive benefits, it's the parents who must bear the cost.

What is the cost for co-operating? Parents have to give up some of the blame game and start taking responsibility for their own happiness. That's a tough stand, and for some, it's easier to just keep the fight going. But notice who pays the price: the child.

IS IT WORTH IT?

Is it worth giving up anger and blame in order to ensure your child an improved chance for happiness and success in life?



LEAP OF FAITH

Making a commitment to a new parental relationship means leaving behind something in order to get something better for yourself **and** for your child. But it does come with a risk.

You have to break out of the old pattern and try something different. You have to leave your comfort zone and forge into the unknown. It requires a leap of faith. Have you ever seen a squirrel run up the tree and scamper out to the end of the branch, readying itself to jump to the branch on the next tree? To get what he wants, a squirrel has to leave the safety of his old position - yes - to take the leap of faith. When parents want to get something better for their children, they too must take that leap of faith.

MAKING THE COMMITMENT TO CARING

There is no doubt that you love your child. You have always done your best to make the best decisions for your child. This is your opportunity to make another decision that is good for your child. Choose to "*make a commitment to caring.*" Choose to do whatever it takes to improve the long-term well-being of your child.

You decide.

If you're willing to make a commitment to your child you will be placing him or her on the first step to long-term well-being.

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