



our family
coalition

NEWSLETTER

The Parent Trap

Making Divorce Easier for Children

By Charles Spiegel



***Editor's Note:** If you think it's hard for you to even think about divorce, imagine getting someone to write about their own. We thank this Our Family Coalition member for agreeing to write about his experience as one part of a separated gay couple with a child. He agreed in the spirit of helping other parents and children facing a family breakup to envision some more positive outcomes, and to find good tools and assistance. His story does not address other aspects of separation and divorce like economic issues of child support or alimony, abusive relationships, or the effect of being registered domestic partners. This story starts from the premise of a child with two legal parents. The author's child was adopted by both parents at birth and his separation occurred while he was a full time stay at home parent and she was 7 years old—4 years ago. He now has joint custody, and his child half time.*

A lot of what you've heard about separation and kids was true for me—that your kid is ready to find out about your break up long before you are ready to tell her—and may find out unintentionally. But life sometimes offers you some unexpected help. For us it was at a family camp we attended with our daughter and her best friend's family. Her friend heard about our separation when our request for two separate cabins was broadcast over the public address system at 9 pm! (Don't ask.) That left us 12 hours—until breakfast—to tell our daughter ourselves. We let our daughter choose whether to have her friend with her during what we described as “an important family conversation.” She did, and we told her under the redwoods with her friend at her side. She cried a little, and then they went off to play.

We learned that they hear things you swear were never discussed in front of them. How else did our daughter know the exact value we put on the coffee table which was the last item we both wanted? Go figure.

It's also true that your kid will likely want you to reconcile long into your divorce. I had to get used to walking past my daughter watching “The Parent Trap” remake. I calmly

discussed her movie choice and the difference between understandable wishes and reality for six months, but I finally snapped 2 years after the separation and like the 50th showing and said “Lindsay Lohan is in jail anyway.” Bursting her bubble about Lohan left me feeling guilty, and good!

As your dissolution moves toward the legal arena, there are a few things to keep in mind. Rule number 1: Keep in mind the community expectation, promoted strongly by NCLR (www.nclrights.org) that LGBT people should never make anti-LGBT family arguments in court. Just don't let yourself go there. Assuming that safety and finances are assured, try to avoid going to court all together. However, court ordered mediation materials have great rules to co-parent by—almost four years later, my copy is still posted in my kitchen.

You might find, as we did, that even if you do go to court, you will find that you need to work creatively yourselves to solve your own disputes. I still wonder if the S.F. judge who heard our case could tell our legal papers apart, since they were not distinguishable as belonging to a “mother” and “father.” There are good resources that come out of the process, though. We found Kids' Turn (www.kidsturn.org),

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a course for the whole family meeting in individual groups (so you are not with your ex) meets one evening a week for six weeks. This fabulous post divorce co-parenting education program can either be ordered by the court or you can participate voluntarily. When the judge ruled on our lives after only 10 minutes of court time, her opinion did offer some good advice. She said, "You two parents need to get out of each others' lives as much as possible."

Statistically, kids' standards of living go down following a divorce. Our divorce requires us both to work full time to maintain two houses each with the former lifestyle of one house and one career. The fact that we have mostly succeeded, with a lot of work, means we are incredibly lucky and our daughter's experience perhaps somewhat atypical. It is hard for the parent(s) who have to move to create a vision that life can go on, when you may question yourself exactly how that is possible. For your child, think logistics, logistics, and logistics. If you can live nearby your former spouse, it reduces the tension around many aspects of co-parenting. Be creative: As a man, I could safely tour apartments at night. After I found one, my daughter and I took bagels and sat on the porch without her knowing it was where we might move, so I could feel how it felt to have her there. And without particularly noticing, I moved to a neighborhood near ice cream parlors and a toy store just at a time when she could start walking to stores alone. So we discovered a whole new challenge focused on her independence and future, having nothing to do with divorce.

Assuming that safety is assured (i.e. neither parent is abusive or abusing), it's in your child's best interest (and therefore in your's) that your child have a strong parenting relationship with the other parent, even if you have misgivings. If possible, you as a parent will need to help your child and their other parent maintain and strengthen their connections. Don't get hung up on the "primary" parent label—if there is one, your child has decided that all by themselves, so your time-sharing arrangement will not determine it. Supporting your child's relationship with their other parent is more likely to show your true parenting role. I recommend this to my friends who are partnered parents of all genders and orientations.

One big surprise of our break-up was the unexpected positives that it led to for my child. She got both her parents back and on a regular schedule. As a 2nd grader with divorced parents, she suddenly had more families that resembled her own than she did as a child with two same gender parents. There was welcome anonymity.

I found it important to find many support systems for myself and my child. My daughter and I still regularly have dinners with another divorced family and we feel like

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one bigger blended family.

It is helpful to remember that there is no reason your child's friends' families should remember your custody schedule. When you are called by these families for playdates at a time your child is with their other parent, devise responses that work for you and your former spouse—perhaps call the other parent yourself and relay the message, even when you don't feel like it. You could also divide families with your child's other parent to make it easier on everyone. Email, correctly used, can be a blessing.

Figure out and celebrate what you can still do together as a family—sports games, your child's birthday party, graduations, and other school events work for us. From my kid's perspective, Halloween is the apex of holidays, and continuing to trick or treat together with other families just like we did before separating, is probably our best demonstration of putting her needs ahead of ours. This has been just the amount of contact her separated parents can manage, but we adjust annually! ☺

NEW! Letters to the Editor

Send feedback on the newsletter or a response to an article to Aimee at aimee@ourfamily.org.

DEVELOPING A PARENTING PARTNERSHIP

- Make explicit agreements, contracts and structured meetings.
- Conduct yourself with formal courtesies.
- Strive for little confrontation, low risk and low emotional intensity.
- Establish high personal privacy and low personal disclosure.
- Act as a guest in the other parent's home; wait to be invited in; do not wander around the house.
- Keep your personal life to yourself – stop asking/answering personal questions.
- Do not expect praise or support from the other parent. Seek out that support from friends, family or support groups.
- Do not make assumptions. Be specific with the other parent.
- Control the urge to engage in the ways you spoke to each other during the relationship.
- Repeatedly practice the courteous and businesslike relationship.