

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

AN MINI COURSE ON
ATTACHMENT-BASED
PARENTING AFTER
SEPARATION

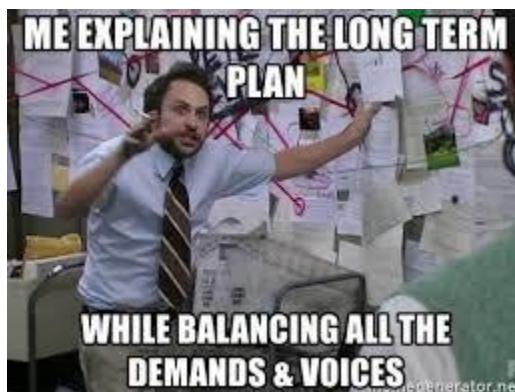


Welcome Back: Time To Make Plans

Welcome to Week 2 of 'Where Do We Go From Here?'. Last week we focused on helping children cope and seeing the ways in which separation and divorce can make things harder for our children so we can better prepare them for it. This week, we focus on the detailed element of coming up with a plan that focuses on keeping attachment during the transition period. Now not all scenarios will be equal because how the separation is going may be difficult, but hopefully you can find ways to implement these ways of working together in order to maximize attachment and the chances your child will thrive post-separation. Again, I am available for office hours should you need to talk through any of these elements.



The Need for Short-Term, Transitional, and Long-Term Plans



Regardless of where you are in the separation, you will need to have three plans in order to allow you to maximize the chance that your children will face minimal disruptions during and after the separation. For some of you, you will be devising this now with your ex and both focused on the needs of your child, which will make it much easier. Some of you may be in a disagreement with your ex over what the plan should look like, but nothing is set in stone. Some of you may be starting with a plan that isn't working for your child and you don't know where to go. We will cover all of these scenarios because they have unique considerations.

Generally speaking, the reason for having three plans is that when it comes to our children's well-being, rarely will the final plan be what is best for them *right now*. However, most people end up on opposite sides of the fence because one parent is thinking about the long-term goals and wants to get there now whereas the other is focusing on the short-term issues. When parents are at opposite sides, the baseline that the courts look to will matter much more and this is why it is so important that you gather that information (if you haven't already).

Another key point to remember as you develop your plans is that custody arrangements are *always fluid*. That is, it doesn't matter what plan you first come up with, your ex can always request a change. This is why I believe that having these three plans minimizes the chances of your ex going back to court to make changes too soon.

Finally, remember that most judges are reasonable. The courts want to do right by the child (though they can fail miserably at this at times) and so the more *reasonable* you are in what you propose and present, the better the chances the court will side closer to what you propose. Of course nothing is a guarantee, but when one side enters with a firm "I want it this way!" and the other comes in with a plan that recognizes the final goals while offering a transition that best suits the child, guess who often looks better?

So, let us take a look at the various types of plans and the research for elements that may be contested in your specific situation...



The Short-Term Plan

As mentioned, the short-term plan is the plan that is in place at the start of the separation, or for you who are already separated but looking for change, the one you have now. This is the starting point that will hopefully lead to the transition plan and then to what is hopefully the longer-term, more permanent plan.

If you haven't separated or are just starting out with separation, you have some control over this one and it is important you make clear to your ex that whatever you guys choose here is temporary. It is the plan that is in place as your child adapts to the separation. Often it will last 1-3 months *only* as new homes are found, schedules developed, and a hashing out of transition and longer-term plans is made. Because it is such a short period, but it happens often before you end up in front of a judge, it is important that you support your child, but do not box out your ex. This is your first chance to show any potential judge and your partner that you are being reasonable and focused on the well-being of your child. The activity in the section above on identifying a baseline should help you see where the starting points will be and the activity below will further aid you in working on this first stage.

Activity: Identify the Short-Term Plan

In this activity, you are going to come up with what you believe will be the ideal short-term plan for your child to help them adapt to the new reality over the course of 1 to 3 months. You should also identify the areas you feel strongest about and those you can be more flexible with in terms of negotiations to start with your ex. Remember that being reasonable is crucial (of course when there is no concern with abuse or anything like that).

A. Location

You need to identify the primary location for your child or if you will start splitting time right away. My personal reading on the attachment and divorce research is that stability during these early stages is central to a child's well-being and so having the child remain in the "marital" home is best.

If this is not feasible because either the primary parent is the one moving out or the house is being sold, identify who will be the one handling the primary care of the child and have the child consider that home their base. In some cases, one family member moves in with grandparents and this can also provide additional stability, especially if the child is close to the grandparents as well.

B. Access

Whoever is not with the child the majority of the time should have free access to visit the child as more permanent situations are planned and developed. However, having free access does *not* mean just showing up whenever without a plan. During this time, children need to learn that although things are changing, it is just to something that is also predictable and thus any haphazard schedule may be detrimental. This is particularly true if you have a high-needs/orchid child. Setting up a visitation plan that is generous with time for all parties is in the child's best interest and parents who can keep to the



plan will help their attachment with their child post-separation.

C. Overnights

If you are including overnights right off the bat because one parent has been doing overnights and this is part of your child's baseline, one option is to have the child stay in their home and parents take turns staying with them there. This means minimal disruption to the child though can be difficult for adults (though depending on how amicable things are, you may be able to share another place as well during this transition time or rely on friends to stay with for a night or two if it's not a common scenario).

If you are not open to sharing the same home and you feel overnights are best for your child to start (either because they are old enough and want them or you just know your child will be okay with this level of transition at this stage), then make sure they are scheduled and regular. Although weekends are often the preferred time, it can be helpful for each parent to have a role in the typical weekday routines and so I do recommend crossing a weekday in order for each parent to have contact with any child care or school.

D. Contact

Contact is different than access because it involves any form of communication between parent and child. During this difficult time, you should identify ways that each parent can have contact and build connections with the child, *even when they aren't together*. This may mean regular facetime at night for younger kids, notes being left when apart, regular phone calls, and so on. Especially during this first period, your child may struggle with the absence of the other parent and so the more they can realize they haven't lost that, the better.

If you already have a plan that you're looking to change, consider it the plan you currently have as you work towards making changes through the courts or negotiations with your ex. In this case, you may very well be starting from a place you aren't as happy about and you may be facing difficulties with your child. If this is the case, please review the sections on handling the change with kids so that you can best support your child *given your current situation*. Unfortunately, there is little to do as you already have your baseline and have to work with it, but definitely write out what the situations are per the above activity and perhaps there are small tweaks you could like creating more contact time or more regular access time.

The Long-Term Plan

This is where you hope to see things end up when it's all said and done. Each side will likely have their own idea of what they want in the end and so expect there to be some compromise. It's important to remember that what you foresee now as the long-term plan may not look anything like where you actually end up as you start to co-parent together. Sometimes it's because of work situations or relocation, sometimes it's because people find they work better or worse together and this shifts things,



and sometimes it's remarriage or a new relationship that changes where things end up. However, this plan is important because it defines the more important transition plan.

If you are starting out in an amicable situation, this plan will likely be easy to define and you and your ex and spend time going over where you want to end up and then plan accordingly. However, if you are either in a situation you are unhappy with or you expect to be facing the courts, the key to remember in a long-term plan is that you want it to look good for the courts you are entering. In most cases, even in countries where the de facto assumption of shared parenting isn't a given, courts like to see each side respect the other and that means including how to best facilitate that other relationship in any plan being devised. Presenting the court with a plan that is specifically laid out to maximize attachment with both parents and respects the individual needs of the child is essential. In my experience and from speaking to lawyers who work in family law, the more reasonable the plan provided, the more likely a judge is to enforce it or a mediator to suggest it.

The hardest part for parents is remembering that the long-term plan comes about after a period of time. This is *not* the plan that you will jump to after the short-term plan. Depending on the age of your child and the situation you're in, this could be what you expect things to look like in 1-2 years. In fact, in one situation I was involved in (with respect to writing a letter on behalf of the mother in terms of setting up a plan that maximized attachment and the child's well-being), the final plan wasn't going to be in effect for around 18 months and the court was okay with that. The key is to remember that you are building towards this.

Another barrier parents have is that they see behaviours in their ex and they don't believe the ex will follow through as they would like. For example, say one side says they want overnights early and the other knows the parent cannot handle them, the key is not to define a plan that removes them, but rather build this into the transition plan. You must have a final plan that looks good to the court, even if you know or believe that the chances of this plan coming to fruition are slim to none. If you focus on your reality now and what you believe, you may look like you're aiming for parental alienation and that is *not* where you want to end up. (We'll talk about parental alienation as a special factor later.)

Activity: Deciding Your Long-Term Plan

Really this includes all the above planning, but you also have to start thinking about other issues like holidays, school, relocation, etc. If you have a lawyer, they will help guide you here, but I make some notes on specific areas below.

A. Location

Where will each of you live? What kind of space are you expecting each of you to have for your child when they are there? You want to plan this type of information out.

B. Access

Generally the more liberal the access you're looking for, the better it goes over (again, barring cases of



abuse). Of course, having a schedule is always good, but things like having it open for sports games or other community/school/extra-curricular activities is good.

C. Overnights

This may be the hardest to decide, but what kind of long-term overnights are you looking to and at what age? Here is where you need to figure out if you're looking long-term at 50-50 custody or some other arrangement. Whatever it is, you must also think about *what age* you want this to come into effect.

D. Contact

Again, you will want to spell out the type of contact (typically unlimited within reason) that you expect to allow or have yourself. Remember that the more closed you are, you risk the same outcome going in the other direction. Regular contact is essential to build attachment; we often forget attachment is built on regular contact, not special time, so the more your child talks to each of you, the better.

E. Holidays

Holidays can be a hard time so you want to map out *exactly* what you want. Are you alternating years? Splitting holidays in half? Sharing them? What kind of contact do you want for each other when you *aren't* physically with your child? It would be highly unlikely that you would ever get anyone not having contact on a holiday so if you explicitly put this in your draft, you look to be the reasonable one and one who does care about attachment.

F. School and Extra-Curricular Activities

Involvement in a child's school and extra-curricular activities is one of the strongest predictors of attachment, sometimes even above overnights. You will want to lay out that you want everyone involved in these situations, especially when it comes to supporting your child. The more liberal you are here, the better it looks.

G. Relocation

Lots of separation agreements have clauses preventing the movement of the child outside a particular radius. However, if you know you don't have family or won't be able to work in particular area, you need to consider that *now* and make that a part of the agreement if you can.

H. New Relationships

Some people want to have certain rules in place about when a child can be introduced and spend time with a new partner. Often parents are considerate about this from the start, but if it's something you're worried about, then you may want to think about what you would want and what is reasonable to expect someone to do. Sometimes people set a time limit, so they had to have been dating for 6 months, just to ensure that the relationship is serious and your child won't be exposed to a series of someones.



The Transition Plan

Once you have your long-term plan, the question is, how do you get there? This is where many separation agreements can fall apart and fail to consider the best interests of the child as they either rush the long-term plan or push for the short-term plan to stay in effect indefinitely which causes clashes.

If you think about your child's best interests in terms of building attachment with both parties, the transition plan is about respecting their need to stay close during the period of transition while slowly introducing the transitions. In cases where a child hasn't ever slept with or done bedtime with one parent, there should be a learning curve for both parties that respects the hesitation the child can feel. One of the biggest risks to attachment is when a parent tries to force change early, gets frustrated when the child resists, and then gets angry or upset at the child or other parent which causes the child to become scared of spending that time with that parent. However, some parents feel they have to push for things early because if they don't get them in writing now, they may not ever get it. *This is why a transition plan is crucial.* When you have this plan, you are putting in writing to courts (and to each other) that the plan that one parent may not see as ideal is not the end-goal and this can bring everyone's energy down a notch.

In most cases and in most of the areas of planning, slow and steady is fair. When you look at your short-term plan and your long-term plan, the decision of the transition plan will vary for each area. For example, when looking at location, if you're staying put and your ex gets a new place, introduction to the new place may be slow and steady and most contact may stay at the child's base for a while. However, if you both move, you may need to up that transition quickly. This is why it's hard to really identify specifics for these transition plans; rather, it's up to you to compare both of your plans and determine the best course of action for each part. As always, I'm here in office hours to help you with this. Of course, as mentioned above, no plan is set in stone and you may have a transition plan that goes awry due to situations that crop up, but when you can show you're thinking not only of your relationship with your child, but of your ex's relationship with your child *and your child's well-being*, it becomes harder to counter.

The crucial part in this transition plan is rooted in the fact that not all judges or systems understand the elements of attachment or biologically-normative parenting techniques. Our system is very much rooted in cultural ideals and thus if you are challenging this (which I imagine some of you may be), you will need have good information at your fingertips. This is why I have the Special Factors section; it covers some of the research on these specific areas that are related to attachment and what you can do to help bolster your case should it come to it *or* how to work within the confines of a suboptimal situation.

With that said, let's turn to the special factors so you have a better idea how to work these into your transition plan.



Special Factors

When devising a plan, there are certain considerations that are not as clear-cut as we would like, especially when it comes to building and maintain attachment and also for higher-needs kids. Many people aren't aware of what the research says and different countries interpret the evidence differently and as mentioned, we are stuck in our culture and our legal system is very much influenced by it, but knowing some of the evidence can be helpful. When you are building your transition plan (which I view as the most important plan), you may have elements that worry you as they are intricately linked to attachment, yet often ignored in our judicial system (and larger society). I hope my covered and some research in each of these areas can help you.

Breastfeeding



Sadly, many mediators and judges are unaware of the importance of breastfeeding to a child's comfort and security and suggest it is a "modifiable" condition that is not worthy of extra consideration, especially if the child is older than 6 months or a year. Of course, this is not quite the case. Research has found that human milk from a mother with a child greater than one year has increased levels of certain immunoglobulins to aid the development of the immune system (Lawrence & Lawrence, 2011; Perrin, Fogelman, Newburg, & Allen, 2017) along with key nutrients for development (e.g., Dewey, 2001). The continued act of breastfeeding should continue to be supported, as is the recommendation by the World Health Organization, who recommends breastfeeding to age 2 and beyond. As such, there should be no judgment on how long a child nurses for and no set timeframe for the child to wean, but this means you'll need to work this into the transition plan for the end-goal of eventual weaning, even if it's child-led.

If you or your ex are nursing a baby or child, especially overnight, it is absolutely reasonable to request that this be a factor in the transition plan. All else being equal, after a year, most children can handle one night away semi-regularly from breastfeeding if they remain cared for and responded to by another parent; thus if the consideration is overnights (which we'll discuss in more depth for kids under 3 below) and you know your child would be okay with the partner outside of breastfeeding, you could start with one overnight every two weeks or so. However, for some kids, they are highly dependent upon nursing to sleep well and an overnight without it could be traumatic. In these cases, I recommend a transition plan that includes waiting until a child is 18 months minimum to work gently towards a transition to



overnights without the breast, but there should never be more than one overnight in a row in order to ensure supply is maintained for the nursing parent.

At any point when you start to introduce time away from the breast overnight or during the day, the disruptions should be minimal in order to maintain supply. This means that any transition plan should ideally not include more than a day away from the nursing parent until the child has weaned. As such, most (amicable) plans that I have worked with include lots of daytime with a plan towards one overnight every week or two once the child is old enough and then eventually working towards more overnights based on the child's nursing patterns.

Co-Sleeping



Another factor that can cause disruption is when a child co-sleeps. If both parents co-sleep and both are amenable to continuing that with overnights, there isn't often much of an issue (providing the breastfeeding piece isn't a problem). The problems come in either of two scenarios:

1. One parent does not agree with co-sleeping and uses it against the other parent to suggest problematic parenting; or
2. One parent refuses to co-sleep if the child is with them even if they take no issue with the other parent co-sleeping.

Obviously, the first is an issue as you can face judges or mediators who may very well agree that it is "wrong" to co-sleep and you are causing problems for your child. The most common complaint is that it will impede the child's social development and yet in many cultures children co-sleep with parents until middle childhood with no negative repercussions reported. Even studies in Western culture fail to find problems with bedsharing beyond infancy from a social well-being perspective (Keller & Goldberg, 2004; Okami, Weisner, & Olmstead, 2002; Welles-Nystrom, 2005), with some even finding benefits in childhood from this arrangement (Keller & Goldberg, 2004). Thus the cultural stigma against bedsharing (especially in toddlerhood) that can be played out in divorce proceedings is *not* evidence-based and the information we do have – anthropological or otherwise – actually counters these concerns. Hopefully with the evidence, you can persuade a judge or mediator that there is no concern.

The second problem though can be more problematic. Children who co-sleep often do so because it (a) works for the family, and (b) it helps them feel safe. In this case, it is hard to think about sending your



child away for a night when you know they'll be scared and alone. This can be compounded if your child is used to co-sleeping with one parent in particular and so being apart from them for a night would be highly traumatic. There are a few options that may work in the transition plan if you cannot get your ex on board to co-sleep and overnights are a must (otherwise consider delaying overnights until your child is older):

1. See if your ex would consider room-sharing as the co-sleeping option as opposed to bedsharing, especially as a transition towards the child being in their own room;
2. Arrange overnights such that the co-sleeping parent can stay close by to provide comfort if needed in the middle of the night; or
3. Allow your ex to try it for a night and see how it goes as sometimes giving them enough rope allows them to realize on their own what a bad idea it is.

In cases where you are a co-sleeping parent and your child is being forced to sleep away from you, please know that you can help your child cope when you are with them. First, continue to co-sleep when your child is with you so that they don't lose that sense of security and comfort. Second, use stories and transition objects to help them learn to feel safe when separate from you. Third, help them process what is happening by talking about their situation with them when they return to you. This last one is crucial to help kids understand and I refer to it as the "What happened then?" discussion where you go through, step by small step, what happened when the child went to sleep until they woke up. You acknowledge and validate all emotions, but also take the time to point out that they made it and at the end they return to you and get to co-sleep again. Doing this repeatedly helps build up a sense of safety when away because they learn they are still safe and it's temporary.

Child Age



Not surprisingly, age matters, especially when we're talking about overnight parenting plans. Although certain locales consider overnights to be a given as a form of shared parenting, the evidence does not always support this. I will say the evidence is pretty clear for older kids, aged 4 and up, in that barring any abuse or neglect, overnights tend to benefit the relationship with the non-primary parent and have no negative effect on the relationship with the primary parent. However, that is not quite the case for younger children (3 and under).



One systematic examination of overnights in young children on attachment found that young children (12 to 20 months) who had regular overnights with the father were more likely to have *insecure* attachments with their mothers with a specific increase in disorganized attachment (George, Solomon, & McIntosh, 2011). An Australian study found mixed findings in young children aged 0 to 5 with overnights in that younger children (aged 3 and under) had negative outcomes associated with overnights, but, as mentioned, older children (aged 4-5) had positive outcomes (McIntosh, Smyth, & Kelaher, 2013). However, there has been one review that suggests there were no negative effects for younger children (Nielsen, 2011), but this counters a more recent review that found that there is limited, high-quality research on overnights to form any firm conclusions with younger children (Austin, 2018).

If you are the parent of a young child and you are coming up with a transition plan, I think it is very fair to consider overnights when the child is older, but work towards that and consider that most of the shared parenting time will be done during the day. I often suggest slowly working in overnights by having the other parent handle bedtimes and even be there for the start of the night, but in the child's primary home (yes, that means having them in the house with you). For the start of overnights, it would be best to have them in the primary home, but that often only works in cases of amicable separation. (Of course, if your ex has always been involved in bedtimes and overnights, this may be less of a concern and you may be able to handle overnights earlier, per the 'as-it-was' baseline.)

Note that having a plan to work in overnights may be *essential* depending on where you are. Although you may not see this as being best for your child for a while, if you try to refuse this or ignore it, it may be forced upon you sooner than you'd like. But as long as you can use the evidence to suggest why it should be delayed and have a timeline for introduction which includes the slow build of bedtimes and perhaps staying close for a spell (see the co-sleeping section), then you can likely create a plan that benefits your child.

Child Temperament



Possibly the most important factor in making any plans is the consideration of your child's temperament. As discussed in the sections on helping your child cope, children who are more sensitive, higher-needs, or orchid will struggle more, especially with the transition, and will need more time to get used to the changes. Something discussed in the research into attachment and shared parenting is how



during times of turmoil or disruption, children will rely more upon their caregivers to help them regulate and cope. This is why many people believe that children need their home base more than ever during this transition and why younger children in particular may be more affected.

This is particularly true for our more sensitive kids. As such, when you create a transition plan, the following is important to remember:

1. You will need to take longer to get to the final plan. Transitions are hard and so the slower and more steady they are, the better off your sensitive child will be. I recommend staying with the “as-it-was” baseline for a while as they adapt and then go very slow with changes.
2. The things that bring them comfort, like breastfeeding or co-sleeping, will be even more essential. You will need to do your best to ensure that you can continue these acts as they actually do provide physiological regulation for your sensitive child, something they may need more of during this period.
3. A home base is going to be far more crucial for these children. This means that the more the adults can move in and out of the home base instead of the child being moved between home bases, the better. Obviously the final plan will include two home bases, but during the transition, this will be important for them.
4. Routines are essential. Try to have similar routines between the homes so that there is a level of predictability to help minimize the stress of disruption for your child. Things don't need to be identical, but try to hash out how evenings will look or time after school as you do not want large differences in the flow of the day.
5. These kids may act out more and require more empathy and support. Because they can experience stress to a greater degree than other kids, they may lash out more as they try to cope with the change, but lack the capacity to regulate well. Be patient with them. When you see them acting out, remind yourself this is them expressing their inner turmoil and sit down to talk to them about what's going on (if they're old enough to understand and discuss) or just spend some time connecting with them (if they're too young).
6. Be flexible. When doing your transition plan, you may find that something you thought would work doesn't actually work for your sensitive child. In this case, you may need to backtrack and rethink things so being open to this type of change will only help your child.

Activity: Devising Your Transition Plan

Now that you have the factors to consider when coming up with your transition plan, you can start to create it. As this is completely dependent upon what you have decided for your long-term plan and the specific factors mentioned herein, there is no work other than to map out what you think you need. If you need assistance planning this, I am available in office hours to help you come up with a transition plan that suits your needs.



Handling Disagreements and Parental Alienation



We all like to hope that we'll be on the same page as our exes when it comes to raising kids, but this doesn't always happen. Hopefully you are able to work with your ex on any disagreements just as you would have when together, but sometimes you can be fundamentally at odds with your ex. When that happens – especially when devising shared parenting plans – you can want to dig your heels in and fight for what you know is right. Unfortunately, this can escalate things and backfire on you.

Depending on the nature of the disagreement, you have different options:

1. If it is a matter of safety and urgency, I recommend contacting the courts or filing a petition. At no time should you ever put your child's well-being at risk. This can take time to work through, but often just knowing you're going to end up in front of a judge can put an end to dangerous behaviours.
2. If the disagreement is about something you know your ex won't follow-through on, I recommend the "give them enough rope" approach. What I mean by this is that sometimes our exes are asking for things that we know they don't want or can't handle and we see it as our time to be right; for example, you may have an ex asking for overnights of a young child and you know your ex could not possibly handle the wakings and difficulties that go with nighttime parenting. The "give them enough rope" approach comes from how my own mother would always tell me to give people enough rope to hang themselves in these situations. By not fighting it, often people come to the right conclusion on their own. This is particularly common when you're dealing with an ex who may be requesting things to hurt you and so by standing down, you actually take away the fight. But this is also why a transition plan can work so well as you're offering what they are asking, but also building up to it.
3. If the disagreement is fundamentally about what is best for your child and you really see things differently, I recommend bringing in a trusted third party to help you navigate this. Having help to go through these disagreements means you each know you're being heard and as long as you trust the person helping you, you can hopefully come out the other side knowing each of you really is doing/planning for what you believe is best. I often recommend a therapist or trained mediator for



these types of situations, not family or friends as this can cause a rift and they will often have their own agendas in sight.

4. For almost all types of disagreements, I recommend a perspective-taking exercise. Try to put yourself in your ex's shoes and see *why* they are asking for what they are. Is it fear? Is it anger? Have they been misled? By doing this, you can better get to the root of the issue and that can make a world of difference in how you negotiate and approach things.
5. Always ask, "What's the worst that could happen?" when you consider your ex's requests. Because separation will inherently involve compromise, you will need to find the times that you are willing to give something a chance. It may not be what you would ideally like, but save your battles for those things that truly matter and know that the more you actually are willing to compromise and try something, the better off you'll be as you'll build the trust of your ex and also provide yourself the space to see what happens. Because you show willingness to try, if it doesn't work out well, your ex will hopefully be more likely to step back as needed; furthermore, if you end up in court, they will look kindly on this type of compromise.

One specific type of problem that deserves discussion is the issue of parental alienation. You may or may not have heard of it, but it refers to one parent trying to turn the children against the other parent or sharing negative stories or information about the other parent. Courts – especially in the United States – are quite concerned about this and very much look down upon it. Of course, the actual prevalence of this doesn't seem to be as high as is being considered and sadly it is being used to ignore reports of abuse.

It should go without saying that I hope you will never speak ill of your ex to your child. It doesn't matter what they are doing, they are your child's parent and not only does this set a really horrid example for your kid, it can actually affect their self-esteem too. Remember that kids are not always logical and will see and think of things differently; if they see themselves like that parent and hear you speaking ill of their parent, they may extrapolate and think you feel the same about them. Or if they do something similar to anything your ex has done, they may also feel they are worthy of the same derision. In short: always maintain a neutral or positive tone when it comes to your ex, no matter what you're going through.

But what if you're on the receiving end of this? What if you know your ex is saying negative things about you to your child? It can be tempting to want to try and talk to your child about this and counter what has been said or find out more, but this is actually not what you want to do. Depending on what's being said and the situation, you may need to approach the courts or a mediator, but hopefully you can handle it before it gets there.

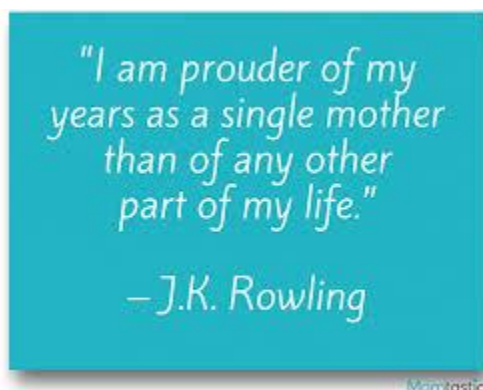
First, keep track of all events and note them at the time, using email which has a time stamp. This way you have records from the events should you ever need them. Second, you will need to talk to your child, but in an indirect way. Instead of directly addressing what might be said, you can have a conversation with them about how sometimes when people are hurt or angry, they can say things that aren't necessarily true out of their own feeling of pain. When that happens, other people need to know



that they may not be hearing the truth. Or if it's something particular that isn't true, you can share a story that may counter it without linking it to the lie. Third, you should consider a therapist for your child to talk to. There are therapists who specialize in working with kids through divorce and they can offer an ear and help them process the things they may be hearing in a safe environment without the child feeling like they are pitting one parent against another. Finally, you may need to talk to your ex about it and suggest a forum for you two to discuss things in a productive way. Acknowledge their anger and/or hurt and be ready to allow space for that to come out so that it doesn't have to come out to your child. I often remind my own kids that sometimes we have to choose between being right or kind and this is a situation where kindness may play better – letting someone vent and lash out at you can suck, but it also may allow that negative energy to leave and then you can move forward from there. However, if you focus on trying to correct their view, chances are you'll just reinforce it.



Handling Attachment As a Single Parent



One of the biggest concerns newly separated parents can have is how to navigate attachment-style parenting as a single parent. When we solo parent, we can end up more overwhelmed by all we need to handle and we can find ourselves getting testy and upset with our kids, more than we'd like. Yet during this period of divorce is when our kids need gentle, responsive parenting the most. In fact, research finds that this sensitive parenting is actually crucial to our children coping with separation and can mitigate the effects of any negativity that is a part of the separation. In one study (Altenhofen, Sutherland, & Biringen, 2010), emotional availability was independently predictive of attachment with parents post-separation in children aged 12 to 73 months (1 to 6 years of age for those of us who don't think in months anymore), *regardless of the amount of contact with the parent or the amount of parental disagreement*. Emotional availability is a crucial component of responsive parenting as it refers to the ability of the parent to allow the child to experience and express various emotional states (good and bad) without judgment or punishment and in turn the child views the parent as someone they can go to when upset or facing a difficulty.

So how do you make sure to remain sensitive and responsive in the face of upheaval for you and having more to handle in your new role as solo parent? The following are all ways you can keep the focus on parenting sensitively:

1. Put aside time in your schedule for connection with your child(ren). Having this time dedicated to the kids means they always know they have you and you know you'll be giving them the individual attention and emotional availability they need. Remember that putting this time into your calendar will help make sure it happens and prioritizes it.
2. Make sure you have support. As mentioned earlier in this course, you have to make sure you have to make sure you have your own support system in place so that you can be there for your children. If you don't have someone to lean on, you will run out of energy too fast and won't be able to be the stable force for your kids.
3. Let things slide. There are likely lots of things that will demand more of your attention and time as a solo parent and we often have the tendency to think we need to be perfect with all of it right off the bat. Sadly this can come at the expense of our parenting as we may buy into the idea that good



parenting is about things like laundry and home cooked meals when in reality, our kids need *us* and if the laundry isn't folded and they have to search through a pile of clean clothes, or if you end up ordering in more than you'd like to make time for you and your kids, they won't mind. It'll take time to get used to the new routines and reality so letting things slide as you focus on your kids is 100% okay.

4. Journal or write letters to your child. Writing down what we're thinking and processing can be incredibly helpful. Some people prefer journaling and keeping these things to themselves, others treat this exercise as a way to write to their kids when they're older (i.e., the letters are for your kids in the future). Whatever you choose, the act of actually writing out our experiences and how we're feeling can help keep us centered and focused on what's important. If you choose the option of writing to your kids, it can also help keep you accountable.
5. Perspective-take. When you're feeling the pressure to do more than you are able, take 2 minutes and talk things through from the perspective of your child. What do they need and what would serve them best? This can help keep us focused on what matters.
6. Remember the 80-20 rule. This rule is all about how we should aim for our parenting ideals 80% of the time and know that we'll have 20% of the time where we mess up, can't live up to what we want for ourselves as parents, and that's okay. We need to be forgiving of ourselves during this time and so if you can know that 20% of the time is going to be harder *and therefore you can immediately forgive yourself*, you will find it easier to be focused on attachment the other 80% of the time.

Remember that attachment is not built off perfection, but off consistently being sensitive and responsive and owning up when you make a mistake. As you're learning this new role of solo parent, make it known to your child that you're also learning and growing with them and you promise to learn from your mistake, but that you will still make them.



Resources That Might Help

Depending on where you are in this journey, the following resources may be of assistance in helping you navigate your separation:

- Apps and programs for contact and scheduling. These can be a game-changer as the app serves as an all-in-one place for you and your ex to plan, talk, and so on. Texts are saved and available to the courts and this often means that people are better at being polite, keeping to the point, and staying on track. When you know a judge could read whatever you send, chances are you're not going to rant and rave to your ex. These apps also including scheduling help and ways of tracking expenses, appointments, and so on and avoids the child being any intermediary. Examples of these apps include:
 - 2houses (<https://www.2houses.com/en/>)
 - Amicable (<https://amicable.io/amicable-divorce-app/>)
 - Coparently (<http://coparently.com/>)
 - Our Family Wizard (<https://www.ourfamilywizard.com/>)
 - Cozi (<https://www.cozi.com/>)

- Courses or books to help you cope with the emotional issues in divorce. If you find you are struggling with your divorce and the strong emotions that can come up with this, I recommend looking a course or a book on helping *you* manage your own emotions. These are often cheaper than therapy for those who cannot afford to explore their emotions in that type of environment. Examples include:
 - Holding Space for Divorce by Amy Glenn (<https://birthbreathanddeath.com/holding-space-for-divorce/>)
 - The Grief Recovery Handbook (<https://amzn.to/36vHRkm>)
 - It's OK That You're Not OK (<https://amzn.to/36JGVZT>)



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