



# Considerations For Optimal Parenting Plans

Kathleen McNamara, PhD  
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Colorado Office of the Child's Representative  
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## What we'll cover

1. Research about risks and protective factors and importance of both parents' involvement in children's lives post divorce/separation.
2. Considerations for lowering risks of poor outcomes and enhancing likelihood of positive outcomes for children
3. Considerations for determining optimal parenting time schedules
4. Voice of the Child considerations
5. Consideration of special issues during Covid-19

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## Divorce as a Risk Factor

- 10-12% of kids from non-divorced families vs 25% of kids from divorced families have significant emotional, social, behavioral problems
- Within 2-3 years after divorce, 75-80% of the children are functioning normally on psychological/social/behavioral measures
- Within 2-3 years after divorce, majority of children are in the average range on academic measures

• Amato & Gilbreth (1999), Amato (2010), Hetherington & Kelly (2002)

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### Additional Risk Factors

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Separation stress
- Psychiatric illness & personality disorders of the parents
- Diminished and inadequate parenting
- Loss of important relationships
- High conflict that involves or uses the children
- Re-partnering & remarriage
- Relocation
- Family structure transitions
- Economic instability

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### Potent Predictor of Poor Outcomes

Exposure to ongoing conflict...

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### Not all conflict is the same

- Putting children in the middle and using them to express parental hostilities and disputes is harmful to children
- Children of high conflict parents *who are not put in middle* do as well as children of low-conflict parents.
- Encapsulating the conflict is key
- Skills for managing conflict

Kelly, 2002, 2005, 2007

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### Types of Coparenting

- Within 2-3 years post divorce:
- ~25-30% Cooperative
- >50% Parallel
- ~ 20% Conflicted

Conflicted → → Parallel/Disengaged → → Cooperative

Kelly (2007)

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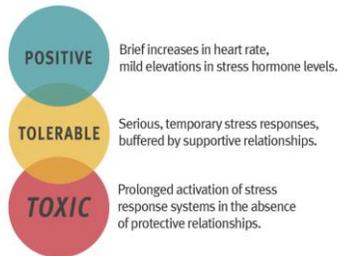
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### High Conflict=Toxic Stress for Children



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### Examples of Toxic Conflict

- Asking child to carry hostile messages
- Asking child intrusive questions about other parent
- Creating a need for the child to hide information
- Encouraging the child to take sides in the conflict
- Asking the child to spy on other parent
- Asking child to participate in one parent's vendetta against the other
- Exposing the child to demeaning comments about the other parent

Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002

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### Chronic parental conflict

- Parents who fail to establish a satisfactory cooperative relationship and expose their children to conflict repeatedly place their children at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties.
- Parental discord is particularly pernicious when there isn't at least one parent in the family providing high quality parenting to buffer the effects of such discord.
- Distinguishing between temporary, transition-related conflict from pervasive conflict is critical to determining how decisions will be made going forward.

Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, Pradhan, Robbins & Pruett (2016)

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### Predictors of Positive Outcomes for Children

- Positive parent-child relationships
- Positive coparenting relationship
- Positive Parenting (warm, sensitive with appropriate demands/discipline)
- Financial Security

Drozdz, Saini & Oleson (2016)

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### Protective Factors-Child

- Active coping style vs avoidance
- Positive thinking, self-talk
- Accurate attributions
- Hope for the future
- Realistic appraisal of their own power and control
- Effective coping skills: e.g., problem-solving, conflict-resolution skills, reframing

Pedro-Carroll (2005)

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### Protective Factors: Family

- Protection from ongoing conflict
- Psychological health of the parents
- Solid supportive relationships with both parents
- Economic security
- Authoritative parenting (choices within boundaries, warmth, firmness)
- Household stability and structure

Pedro-Carroll (2005)

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### Protective Factors- Extrafamilial

- Supportive relationships with adult role models
- Support network: family, school, and community
- Evidenced-informed interventions
- Skills training

Pedro-Carroll (2005)

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### Practice Tips

- Assess Risk Factors
- Assess Protective Factors
- Consider specific recommendations for lowering risks and enhancing protections
- Be aware of resources in your community
- Preventive and Early Intervention mitigates harm

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## Importance of Dual Parent Involvement

To date, over 160 studies, across family structures, cultures and living circumstances, have found when father are positively engaged in with their children, their children derive cognitive, emotional, and social benefits in terms of adjustment and resilience in the face of familial and environment risks.

Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, Pradhan, Robbins & Pruett (2016)

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## Behavioral Benefits

- Reduced contact with juvenile justice
- Delay in initial sexual activity, reduce pregnancy
- Reduced rates of divorce
- Less reliance on aggressive conflict resolution

Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, Pradhan, Robbins & Pruett (2016)

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## Educational Benefits

- Higher grade completion, graduation rates, and income
- Math competence in girls
- Verbal strengths in boys and girls (literacy skills)
- Enjoy school more

Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, Pradhan, Robbins & Pruett (2016)

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### Emotional/Social Benefits

- Greater problem-solving competence and stress tolerance
- Greater empathy and moral sensitivity; reduced gender stereotyping
- Initiative and self-direction
- Positive peer relationships

Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, Pradhan, Robbins & Pruett (2016)

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### Limiting Parent Involvement

- Severe drug or alcohol abuse
- Intimate Partner Violence
- Child Abuse/Neglect
- Toxic stress related to parent conflict

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### Findings about Mothers' Role in Father Involvement

- When mothers are more satisfied with fathers' parenting, fathers tend to be more positively involved.
- When mothers have negative attitudes toward fathers, father involvement tends to be less.
- Mothers are more satisfied with fathers' parenting when conflict is low.
- Mothers' attitudes toward father's parenting after divorce are related to how they feel about father's treatment of them during the marriage.

Austin, Fieldstone & Kline Pruett (2013)

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### Effective coparenting: What's necessary and sufficient?

Two critical ingredients:

- Making arrangements for children
- Cooperating and communicating enough to meet children's needs (joint decisions)

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### Cooperative Coparenting- the ideal

- Strive to agree on what child's needs are
- Expressly and implicitly value importance of other parent's contribution to child-rearing
- Recognize gender differences that lead to distinct ways of parenting
- Allow children's needs to dictate how conflicts get resolved
- Create a "team," a co-parent alliance, in which parents back each other up
- CC provides a safety net for children
- CC enhances children's relationship with both parents

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### Parallel Coparenting- may be necessary

- Nothing is assumed- highly detailed parenting plan
- Parents work independently for best interests of child
- To minimize conflict, no assumption of flexibility
- Transitions at school, daycare or activities
- Separate conferences with teachers, doctors, etc.
- Use of parenting communication tools- Our Family Wizard, Talking Parents, etc. to exchange information
- Coparent meetings may require presence of third party (e.g., PC/DM)
- A parenting coordinator/decision-maker/arbitrator often is necessary

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### Optimal Parenting Time Schedules

- Current state of the research does not lead to a presumption in favor of equal time shares.
- Must consider the unique circumstances of individual families and children
- There is *no* research to show that *any* parenting plan is better than another.
- There *is* research to show that the significant involvement of both parents post-separation is associated with positive outcomes for children.

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### Quality vs Quantity

- Quality is more important than quantity, BUT...
- Enough time is necessary
- Active & positive parenting is what is meant by “quality”
- Involvement in multiple aspects of the child’s life (school, activities, friendships, healthcare, etc)
- Researchers define “significant involvement” or “shared parenting time” as at least 30% time

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### Practice Tips

- Optimal frequency and duration of time depends on many factors
- Gold standard: Best fit between the unique needs of child and capacity of the parents to meet those needs
- Maximize positive influences and available resources within family systems
- Minimize negative influences and risks that may be present
- Practicalities are important- distance, work schedules, availability of each parent
- Be sensitive to child age and development, but no “one size fits all”
- Think of recommendations as a roadmap for the family to move forward

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### Voice of the Child

- "Voice, not a choice"
- Whose voice is it?

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### Children's Wishes: CRS §14-10-124, 1.5 (a) II

Children's wishes shall be considered in determining their best interests if the child is **sufficiently mature** to express **reasoned and independent** preferences as to the parenting time schedule.

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### Independent Preferences

- Is there such a thing?
- Is it necessarily good?
- Key question: What, whom has influenced the child's preference?

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### What does “Sufficiently Mature” Mean?

- Subjective and relative concept
- More than physical maturity
- More than intelligence and academic success
- More than social skills
- Constellation of many areas of development: Physical, Cognitive, Social, Emotional, Moral

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### Practice Tips

- Don't be fooled by physical maturity (the big 8-year-old or physically mature 14-year-old)
- Verbal and cognitive skills ≠ emotional maturity
- Emotional maturity is difficult to discern from outward appearances
- Is this child a “chameleon” child (people pleaser) or an adultified or parentified child?
- Is this child displaying “pseudo-maturity?”
- Is this child prone to depression, worry, somatic symptoms? Suffering from trauma?
- Does this child have mature emotional coping skills?

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### Coparenting during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Wealth of Resources for professionals and parents:

<https://www.afccnet.org/Coronavirus>

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### Impact on Professionals

- Shifting to video technologies
- Challenges to conducting assessments by teleconference
  - Interviewing children
  - Observing parent-child interactions
  - Home visits
  - Privacy issues
  - Loss of face-to-face communication qualities
- Limited access to courts
- Parents under parenting time restrictions

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### Impact on Families

- Confusion/controversy about health and safety information
- Stress about becoming ill/transmitting the virus to others
- Occupational stress
- Economic pressures
- Parenting stress
- Educational issues (especially special needs children)
- Deterioration in mental health
- Increase in substance use
- Diminished parenting
- Conflicts related to sticking to the parenting plan
- Using pandemic to restrict other parent's access to children

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### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs




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Practice Tips

- Empathize
- Expect cases to take more time
- Assist with temporary solutions
- Do your best (aka: improvise)

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Resources for Parents

- **High Conflict Coparenting Classes:**  
16-hour online "Parenting Without Conflict" Class (Bill Eddy, LCSW, JD):  
<https://www.onlineparentingprograms.com/online-classes/parenting-without-conflict-class.html>  
\$139.00 with financial assistance available. Fees waived for parents who are indigent.
- **Level 2 Coparenting Communication classes**  
(parents attend together):  
<http://kathleenmcnamaraphd.com/> (Fort Collins) or  
<https://www.level2coparenting.com/> (Longmont) or  
<https://www.parentingafterdivorce.org/>  
(Denver/Broomfield)  
\$400.00 per parent

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Resources Cont.

- **Parenting Skills:**  
12 hour online parenting skills class for parents of children 0-5:  
<https://www.onlineparentingprograms.com/online-classes/parenting-skills-class.html>  
\$79.99 with financial assistance available, including fee waiver for indigent parents.

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For More Information

Contact me at:  
KathleenMcNamaraPhD@gmail.com

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