

Transcript of Co-Parenting: What It Is and How to Make It Work

Allyson Fulton: Good morning. I am Allison Fulton, Family Support Coordinator with the Pennsylvania Family Support team, based at the Center for Schools and Communities. I will be your moderator for today. It's my pleasure to welcome you to today's webinar session, Co-Parenting: What it is and how to make it work. Our presenters, for today's session, are Lori Auten and Jennifer Banks. Lori and Jen both work for the Columbia County Family Center and as members of the Child Focused Parenting Team.

Lori has been with the Family Center for 18 years and Jen for 13. It is my pleasure to welcome both Lori and Jen this morning. Please be patient while I pass the presenter privileges on to them. Jennifer and Lori, thank you for joining us and the microphone is now yours.

Lori Auten: Hi. This is Lori. Can everybody hear me? I've been working with families and children for over 20 years and I'm going to turn it over to Jen here.

Jennifer Banks: Hello everybody. My name is Jennifer Banks and I have been working with families for over 13 years at the Family Center.

Lori Auten: Okay. We both teach a class, offered by the Family Center, called child focused parenting and it's based off of a national program, called TransParenting, which Jen is going to discuss with you shortly. By the conclusion of this webinar, you're going to learn the stages of the grieving process and when to seek help. You're going to learn how the effects of divorce and conflict affect children, what to do if one parent refuses to co-parent, how to eliminate putting children in unhealthy roles, and how a family service worker can support both parents during the divorce process. So I'm going to turn it over to Jen, who's going to give you a brief history of TransParenting.

Jennifer Banks: Okay. The TransParenting curriculum was developed by Families First. It was initially piloted in 1988. The TransParenting curriculum has been featured on 20/20, The Today Show, CNN, ABC, CBS News, the New York Times, and also Parade Magazine. The program was found to significantly reduce litigation, in addition to helping reduce conflict, and the negative effects on children. The TransParenting curriculum is a nationwide program, and is used in over 250 jurisdictions, across 29 states. TransParenting gives adults the chance to see divorce, or separation, through the eyes of their children.

Lori Auten: Okay. Let's start out with a polling question. True or false, to protect my children, I must fight. What do you think about that?

Allyson Fulton: Okay Lori, it looks like we have about 76% of people have voted, and 76% say that that is false, and 24% say it is true.

Lori Auten:

Okay. That's interesting. I'd like to hear about that, but actually the answer is false. The fight cannot protect the children, because the fight is precisely what's hurting the children. So success, in divorce and separation, is not about winning a fight, but ending it. What's the overall effects of separation, or divorce, on children? Well, here's the big picture. Most Americans value a family household of two parents, two children, a boy and a girl, and a dog, living in a cute Cape Cod in the suburbs. This lifestyle is pretty uncommon anymore and more than half of all children live in a divorced family household.

Divorce is a family change that can be highly traumatic for children. However, most can adjust well and the adjustment process can take relatively about two years. If marriage ends when there's no children present, adults can pretty well separate into their individual lives fairly easily. But when you have a child involved, and the family is separated, children go through an enormous amount of emotions. One of them is being abandoned by at least one parent. One reason this is so difficult for children is that they don't have enough life experiences to make sense of their world, or why their parents aren't together anymore.

To the younger child, it's really easy for them to think, "Well, oh one parent left, when's the other going to leave? Who's going to take care of me?" So all these thoughts are going through their head, and sadly a lot of children are afraid to ask what happened. So maybe their fears are true, and they will be abandoned, and if you, and parents, if you don't explain what separation means, your child is going to be at risk for remaining in a state of chronic anxiety. Some younger children, they don't have the tools to express their feelings, which can lead to other problems.

So it'd be really nice if kids could just come out and say something like, "Can you please tell me what's going on? Why did Mommy leave?" Or, "Why did Daddy leave?" Your child needs you to take the time to insure them that the divorce is not their fault. Give them a simple explanation and tell them more when they ask questions. Just make sure you're telling them what happened, without putting down the other parent, even if the other parent was at fault.

Jennifer Banks:

Okay. I'm going to briefly talk about how the parents can explain separation, or divorce, to their children. The first key point is even though a marriage has ended, you will still continue to be a family. Children really need to know that they are still going to be a part of a family, because by being part of a family, the children will be provided with socialization, and love, and support, as well as a sense of belonging. We all know that being part of a family helps us to establish our identity and your children need to know that they will have that as well.

The second point would be that it was a mutual decision and you did not cause it. Children need to hear what we will call key messages, to help them cope with this decision, and help them to adjust to the new things that are going to be happening in their lives. Some examples of key messages to tell your children would be, "You will continue to be cared for and this decision did not occur on a whim." Let them know that even though the marriage will not continue, that their family will continue. Encourage friendships and allow the children to talk about it.

As Lori had mentioned, a lot of homes, now are divorce homes, or separated homes, so encourage your children to find friends that have the same situations that they're going through. Same thing as the parents, they need to have friendships that are going to allow them to talk about the separation and the divorce. Finally, communicate. Parents may need to understand that it may take children time to talk about the divorce or the separation. Their whole world has been turned upside down, so they may not be ready to communicate about that immediately.

When the children do come to you about questions, about divorce and separations, answer their questions to the best of your ability. If you're not sure how to answer them, seek help to answer the question, so that you know you're giving them good, adequate answers. Co-parenting. I'm going to give you guys a little bit of information about what co-parenting consists of. The first thing is, co-parenting is a partnership focused only on parenting issues. This type of parenting is going to put the children's needs and interests first, before those of the parents.

Co-parenting involves cooperation, communication, compromise, and consistency. These are the key things to keep in mind when forming a co-parenting relationship. Develop a parenting plan. Try to refrain from using words, such as custody, and visits, because these sound very technical, and they're the kind of things that kids may not understand, or be able to adjust to. When you're establishing, what they are calling a parenting plan, make sure to discuss residential arrangements, where that child's going to spend the majority of their time, transfer of children from one parent to another, how this transfer is going to take place, child care, whether Mom has child care, while she's at work, or dad has childcare at work, it's a good thing to discuss that in a parenting plan.

You want to discuss how can communication between the adults will occur. Whether you choose to do that through text messages, emails, or actual phone conversation. Parenting schedules. Parents sometimes have things that come up in their lives that they may need the other parent to step in and watch the child that day. You want to talk about belongings, whether the child is still using a pacifier, whether they have a favorite blanket that will go from house to house. And maybe for the older children, their social life, keep that in key in a parenting plan. There's high school dances, time with friends, those are the kinds of things that are important to keep in your parenting plan.

The next thing would be, the grieving process may get in the way of successful co-parenting. Depending on the stage of grief that the parent is in, through this divorce or separation process, this is going to help to determine the success of a co-parenting relationship. We are now going to move into those stages of grief and Lori's going to give you a little bit more information about that.

Lori Auten:

Okay. When we, as humans, lose something, we go through our natural process of grieving. This is, like I said, natural, and it's difficult, and it takes some time. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified the five stages of grief, that people go through this during this process. They are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then

finally, acceptance. The most important thing to realize is to learn to identify feelings in each stage and find healthy ways to cope with feelings. There's no time line, or specific order for these stages, and you may end up with an experience that may trigger you to return to a previous stage of grief. But by becoming familiar with these stages, and how to identify your own feelings, you'll be able to help your children identify their feelings, and how to safely express them. Children can feel all of the emotions that adults feel.

The first stage is denial. This is a stage of disbelief, or kind of like a bump in the road, and you think you might get back together. With kids, if they don't believe something is happening, then maybe it's not really happening at all. Kids will often make excuses as to why the parent isn't home. They may say like dad got another job, he's working far away, or my parents had this fight before, they'll get back together. Denial serves as a protection to defend ourselves against intolerable pain, until it can be tolerable. For children, denial is a way of controlling a situation in which they have no control over.

The next stage is anger. Children get angry at having to experience pain and that their parents can't find another solution. They're angry that they think they caused the divorce. They're angry because of the situation, they may have to move. Children express anger by fighting with siblings, or you might see some self-destructive behavior.

Bargaining, this is a last-ditch effort to keep parents from divorcing. In this stage kids promise to be a better kid. You'll find that they're keeping their rooms clean, they'll offer to help out around the house, and you might think these kids are really handling this situation well. But actually, the kids that are bargaining, they sometimes think that the divorce is their fault, and if they do something different, then things will go back to the way they were.

The next stage is depression. When children realize that divorce is really going to happen, they're going to become sad. Being sad is okay. They're going to exhibit these normal signs of depression. They may withdraw, they want to be alone, you may notice differences in sleeping habits, maybe eating habits, they won't want to do their favorite activities anymore, and you may also see a drop in grades, or difficulty concentrating.

The last stage is acceptance. Eventually, children are going to reach this stage. It may take a year, it may take two years, but they will have a new focus on the future, and they won't dwell so much on the past. Any problems that come up in life, they're going to start realizing that it's, hey, this is a part of life, this isn't happening because of the divorce. So just know that the feelings associated with these feelings stages are normal and to be expected.

But how do I know if my child is stuck? Observe your child for changes in their normal behavior. Look for changes that are consistent, constant, dramatically different from their usual behavior, and leave you feeling like, man, I can't cope with this, what's going on. These are called behavioral extremes and they can help serve as a guideline to determine if your child needs professional help or

not. An absence of sadness, may signal that a child is stuck in denial, and they're spending a lot of energy repressing feelings, while the other end of the spectrum is a long-lasting depression. This is a depression that's extended for a long period of time, and it's an indication of self-destructive behavior, or thoughts of suicide, would really demand that the parents seek help of a professional who's trained in diagnosing children with emotional difficulties.

You have a child that's continuously acting out. This is another behavioral extreme. Not having the ability to respond to limits, or redirection, might be exhibited by a child whose stuck in feelings of anger. It's extremely important that children learn to move through angry feelings and learn healthy ways to cope with anger. If they have poor coping skills in childhood, they're often going to be moved over, and carried into adulthood.

Being overly responsible is another extreme. This is overlooked by adults, because these children seem to be really handling all the changes with such maturity. Children who are overly responsible could be assuming the responsibility for the divorce, despite messages to the contrary. Explaining divorce to children, is a lifelong process, because of the child's inability to understand these changes, and children need to be reassured that they are not to blame, and the divorce is not their fault, and they are not responsible, and the divorce is permanent.

It's hard for them to accept change, so be sure to look for any specific behavior changes that indicate a need for your child to get help. Any unexplained mood changes, talking of wanting to end their pain, or engaging in risky behavior. Any isolation, wanting to be by themselves all the time, or even aggression towards their friends. Are there any questions about the stages of grief? Okay. Moving right along.

One of the biggest changes for children is the process of spending individual time with each parent, so structuring these times would be most successful if parents consider the developmental stage of their children. Child development experts recommend that parenting plans be revisited, and revised, probably every two to three years, as the developmental needs of the children change. A parenting plan will provide structure. It may take a while for this plan to work for everyone, so don't expect miracles right away.

Remember that your child is a child first and a child in a divorced family second. Normal growth and development is stronger than family lifestyle. This means that normal stages are stronger than the influence of the family situation. Two year olds move all over the place, dangerously. Four year olds tell stories. Seven year olds have trouble with competition. Teenagers talk on the phone. Just know that these are normal behaviors and they're unaffected by the divorce. Because a lot of parents will blame the divorce on the other parent, especially when they're acting up. When actually, their behavior's quite normal.

What you see here is a chart of possible reactions of children at each stage of development. The child may, or may not, exhibit these behaviors at each stage,

but it's kind of comforting to know that these behaviors are normal, and can be managed, and these behaviors occur in children whose parents are not divorced. They're normal behaviors for children at that age or normal responses for divorce. Jen's going to fill you in on what a parenting plan must also consider.

Jennifer Banks:

Okay. So both Lori and I did talk a little bit about parenting plans, but I'm going to get into a little bit more in depth of what this could consist of. Something to think of is, it is the job of both parents to raise their children to become a productive member of society. As I kind of mentioned a little bit earlier, children want both parents in their life, and they will experience an easier adjustment to the divorce, or the separation, when they do have a relationship with both of their parents. Understand that you do not have to like each other to accomplish raising a successful child.

The best example I could use in this kind of situation is, think of a coworker that you don't really have the best relationship with. It may not even be that you don't have the best relationship, but it's somebody you may not know really well, that you don't work with, so you're not really comfortable doing anything with that coworker. Now, your boss has told you that you have to work on a project with that person. Even though this person is the last person you would want to put time and energy into, you have a job to do. You have an assignment and it's something that you need to do, to get completed with this person. It is your responsibility to make sure that this project is done to the best of your ability, because after all, it's your job.

A lot of times, co-parenting can feel like this at times. The common goal is that the parents are working towards raising a well rounded child. Let go of all resentment and allow your child to love you both. You kind of have to put that aside, those feelings that you have for that person, because things have changed in your relationship, so it's best to let go of all that resentment and make sure that your child can love both of you equally.

Guidelines for communication. Establish times for talking business with that other parent. Agree on what you will talk about and how you will present those kinds of things to your child. For example, you could tell that other person, "We will talk when the children are in school or in bed. We will not talk about the situation while they are in front of us." Also, discuss how you will communicate with that person.

Some options of that, as I mentioned earlier, could include texting, or emailing, or even just having a phone conversation with that person. Custody transfers between the two parents should be brief. It is implied that transfers should take no longer than four minutes. Think of four minutes. They really don't allow a lot of wiggle room to get into any kind of discussion with that person, so this time is short because it doesn't allow that time to argue or have any discussion that you may not want the children to hear in front of them.

Share a calendar and a notebook. A record of arrangements can avoid any kind of possible confusion that you may have at a later date. The notebook could be

sent with the child to exchange from parent to parent. There are pros and cons of sharing a calendar and a notebook. A pro of this would be that this communication style is that the other parent will have a documentation about the other parents time with the child as well as any important information that the other parent may need to know, based on what occurred during that visit. A lot of times, with younger children, they may be going through potty training and it may be something to jot down in a notebook that the child maybe did not do well that weekend or the child did great. It's good to put that kind of information in your notebook, so you don't forget.

A con of this style is that the notebook may get lost, it could get changed, it could get destroyed, the child could actually read it, because that exchange is going to be made through the child. It may not be affective in dealing with any kind of time sensitive issues that the parents may have. Children should be permitted to have access to both parents. Whether it be a phone call, a letter, email, text messages, whatever. It's important that the children be permitted to talk to each parent.

Okay, so I have a question for everyone. My question would be, I would like to co-parent but my ex is a jerk. What I'm looking for here is do you any of you guys have any suggestions as to how we could make this relationship work?

Allyson Fulton: All right. You can go ahead and type your answers into the question box and we'll read a few off as they come in. Okay. While we're waiting for a few of these to come in, Jen, I actually have a question for you. You said about the child having access to both parents. I'm assuming if that is able to happen? In case there's like a, you know, if there would be like a protection from abuse order, or something like that. There might be situations where co-parent is not possible. Is that something that you have seen in the past? That co-parenting just isn't possible because of something like that?

Jennifer Banks: Yes. We've heard that situation actually quite a few times. Later on in the presentation, I'm gonna talk about something called parallel parenting. That might actually be a better option than the co-parenting. We've heard, sometimes too, if there is like a PFA, or anything like that, that you could get a trusting friend to do the exchange. I'm gonna let Lori actually talk a little bit about this.

Lori Auten: Some ideas for co-parenting when there is a PFA involved, or any type of domestic violence, document everything. Have a written record, that you may take to court, even if it's violent, or non-violent interactions. This is where boundaries really come in. You'd have to set real realistic boundaries on how communication will occur.

So if there was a protection from abuse, obviously, a lot of communication won't be face-to-face. This is where email or text messaging may come in handy. If you do need do an exchange face-to-face, prioritize safety. Make sure that it's in a public location, so that your safety isn't compromised.

Jennifer Banks: I know there are even some cases, as we discuss in our TransParenting class, that may be unsafe for your child to go to that other parent. Those do include those domestic situations, whether it's verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Those are the kinds of thing that if that's happening, you want to talk to a lawyer, so that way a judge could maybe put a plan in place.

Allyson Fulton: Okay. Well, we do have ... Thank you for answering that question. We do have lots of responses that have come in. A couple folks have suggested some apps. Cozy for a calendar app. Wizard app. Then, also a third party might help too, in this situation. Come to a mutual agreement that there will be no name calling, which might be important there. Put your feelings aside about your ex and focus on the well being of your children. Which, of course, might be easier said than done at times. But ...

Minimal communication. Only communicate about the child. Brief, to the point, with no emotion, when communicating. Leave the notebook at school for pick up and drop off. You'll be dealing with it, discussing only things about your children, so several people have said that. Always stay calm, never explode. Continue to discuss the importance of how this is best and for the best interest of the child. Stop blaming and make a plan.

Have a neutral party to mediate, so a lot of this third party. Put your personal opinions aside. Explain the child's need for the other parent. Act like adults, which, you know, again ... Allow a grandparent to do the transfer. Limit communication to only necessary communication. Each parent needs counseling to resolve feelings towards each other, that's a good point there. In a place where that they can co-parent, so they might need to do some personal work, perhaps prior. The ex might think that you're a jerk also. Good point.

Communication is key. You can still co-parent with a jerk. The child loves that jerk. The jerk parent might still be in the anger phase. You know what, that's a really good point, we're kind of giggling a little bit here, but that's absolutely right. I think you all are touching on some of those feelings that are harder to set aside than we might think sometimes. Here, this is a question, what do you do if the other parent is an alcoholic? So we'll hold on to that question and maybe you guys can check that in just a second.

Let me just give you a couple more here, we're almost to the end. They may need a co-parenting class or therapy session. Again, that's sort of working on ourselves first. Try to sit down and make some sort of agreement. If that doesn't work, maybe a third party could be involved. Do not speak poorly of the ex jerk in front of the kids. Try to keep the focus on children and remind parent of the relationship with the child.

For families, on here, someone speaking exactly to that PFA. For families with PFAs, we complete the same kind of parenting program in the home of each parent separately, and then we encourage all parties to be able to use the Wizard app. Parents, attorney's, et cetera, are using that Wizard app.

Jennifer Banks: Wow. Those were awesome responses. I can tell you, in teaching the co-parenting class with Lori, that is probably the biggest question we get. Parents are saying we are here, taking the class, to learn how to co-parent, but the other parent isn't here. So how am I supposed to do this, if they are not learning it. A lot of times, we'll tell the parents that we are giving them the tools and all we can do is wish that they continue on that path, with those tools that we have given them, so that they can have a successful co-parenting relationship.

I can honestly tell you at this point in time, I had a parent ask me recently, "We are trying to co-parent, but he is not listening to anything I say, and he's the one who's being belligerent, and it's not working." So she asked me, "What can I do?" I had suggested to her about taking the TransParenting class. When I went to see her again, she had told me he absolutely refuses to do it. I encouraged her to take it anyways, so that way she could have the tools, and focus on the children, and just do what she can do, even though he won't.

I thank you guys for those suggestions, because that is a very prominent question that we get. Just moving on, what happens when my ex won't co-parent with me? Some parents truly are so self involved in their own hurt and anger that they are unable to see past their own needs, even for the sake of their own child. It's a very tumultuous time for everybody. I mean, you were once in an emotional, intimate relationship with this person, so some people may get caught up in those different stages of grief, and it's hard for them to move on past being self-involved.

If a resolution cannot be worked out, children will still be fine with one stable parent. Children need one parent to guide them through life. So even though we are pushing a child being involved with both of their parents, if that cannot be worked out, or happen, your children will still be fine with one stable parent. This gives you the opportunity of teaching your child how to effectively work with difficult people. Again, kind of going back to that being assigned to work with a co-worker that you may not work well with, you still need to do it. There's people out there that are difficult to work with at times and you can kind of use it as a teaching moment with your children, without kind of getting into too much with what's going on. But you're gonna be their role model and show them how to effectively work with difficult people.

The best thing for a parent to do is to observe their own behavior and keep their child from being involved in that unnecessary conflict. The other parent may throw triggers out to them, to try to get a reaction out of them. As the parent, who's given those tools to co-parent, the best thing for them to do is just observe their own behavior, their own responses to that person, so that way they don't get themselves, or their children, involved in that unnecessary conflict. Okay. I'm going to move on to Lori now, and she's going to give some suggestions for co-parenting with an uncooperative ex.

Lori Auten: Okay. So you've read all the co-parenting books, you have a script for your next phone call with your ex, and you even have plan B, just in case he's being a jerk. Obviously it's better when both parents can cooperate, but sometimes it's just not

possible, so it can be really difficult to put away your own hurt, and anger, in the little corner, and focus on the best interest of your child. But even if you're going to co-parent by yourself, there's so much more you can do to establish positive co-parenting patterns, that will increase the odds of getting cooperation down the road.

If your ex is being continuously difficult with you, this is confusing, and even hurtful to your children. But if you observe your own behavior, you're teaching your children how to protect themselves from getting caught in unnecessary conflict. So, what happens when my ex is just angry and there's no reasoning with him? Well, the key is to remain focused on what's going to reduce the conflict with the children. The first suggestion is negotiate. Pretend you're a hostage negotiator. Now, this sounds a little extreme, but think about it. Hopefully, your kids haven't really been taken hostage by your ex.

But remember, they're the ones who has to go to visits with the other parent, and stay for a weekends, and share time with, and they're the ones who's going to have to be the subject of whatever anger the parents are dishing out. So you have to make a choice here, do you really want to win arguments at any cost, or do you want to keep your children out of conflict? So if the other parent continuously brings me children home an hour late, just to upset you, you can take the high road, and thank them for bringing them home safely. If you start yelling and fighting, your kids are going to get scared, and they're going to get confused, and they're going to feel like this is their fault, so practice negotiation.

Establish the tone of the communication. You can speak calmly and respectfully. Be supportive. You can simply say something like, "I'm sure we can find a solution that will work for all of us." Reinforce the positive. Even though this is really difficult sometimes, just saying something like, "This would be great, if you would consider doing that, I would really appreciate you helping me out." Compromising is another suggestion. This will reduce conflict and hopefully lead to a greater chance of compromise in the future with the other parent.

Just listen to them. Actively listen, summarize what they're saying, just to make sure you understand it. Remember that the point is to diffuse the anger, which is then going to reduce the conflict. So even if your ex is trying to work you up, instead of being defensive, be agreeable. This is going to take away their power, and when they see that it's not working anymore, they're going to get tired of their own game. Remember, your child needs at least one stable parent in their lives, so be that parent, regardless of how your ex is acting.

This doesn't mean that you have to take any verbal abuse, or be a doormat, but what's damaging to your child, is seeing both parents behaving in hurtful ways. If both parents are out of control, who can your kids depend on to bring them safety and security? Your child's watching you and they're looking for a way for you to help them make sense of their world. If they see you going crazy every time your with the other parent, you're indicating that the world is really scary place for them.

Children need to know that someone's always going to take care of them. If your ex is starting a conversation, where it really becomes verbally abusive, tell them that you're happy to continue this conversation later, when they can be polite, and not a jerk. When you talk with the other parent, don't talk down to them. Treat them as if they're acting like an adult, even though they're not. If they're having a tantrum, turn around, and walk away. What are your children learning when they see two parents in a cat fight?

During the separation, or the divorce process, there comes a time when you really need to talk with somebody, and it's important that you have those people in your lives. Your children are not those people. Let your kids be kids, let children be children. They need to know that you could take care of yourself, so that you could take care of them. If you're leaning on them for support, your inhibiting their normal growth and development through this matter. Find a therapist, or a counselor, lean on a good friend, or even if you're a member of a church, reach out to members of the congregation.

Most importantly, don't sweat the small stuff. It's really easy to get caught up in all the details of parenting, and making sure you're doing all the correct things when raising your child, but when your kids grow up, are they really going to remember that you made them eat broccoli for dinner, or you made them go to bed at 7 o'clock. Or what if they're visiting their dad for the weekend and you forgot to give them your vitamins, or they send them home with their hair unbrushed? Think of your children as adults and try to imagine them telling you what they remember most about growing up.

Are they gonna say, like, "Wow Mom and Dad, thanks for spending so much time fighting with each other. It was really fun watching my college fund go straight to your lawyers kids." Or are they going to say something like, "You know Mom and Dad, you really did a good job of keeping me out of conflict. That must have been really difficult and I appreciate that." Remember that your relationship with your children, as adults, is going to be established right now. If your children see you as blaming, angry, mean, nasty, jerky person, it's not going to magically change when they hit 18, or when they get married, or where they have kids. So keep your eyes on the prize. It's gonna pay off a lot later.

Another suggestion, just vent. Suppose your ex is bribing your kids, or encouraging him to like him better, or he's buying them a bike, when you're totally against it, it's obviously going to infuriate you, but venting with a friend, or a counselor, is a good tool, and it's also really necessary. Just remember to do this away from your kids and try to let go of the resentment as much as possible. Sometimes it's good to find a few friends to vent to, so you're not dumping all on one same person.

Another suggestion to help you cope, really do assume that they have the kids best interest in mind, and unless there's actual abuse happening, they probably really do love their kids, at least to the best that they can. None of us love perfectly and it's important that you respect the other parents love for them. If you send the message that the other parent doesn't love the kids, or they don't love

them as much, you're really hurting your children. If the other parent disappoints your kids, by forgetting to show up at their ballet recital, or graduation, try to help your children see that this is not a problem with their parents love for them, because you're sending the message that they're not worthy of being loved in the first place.

How can you handle this? Remind your child that you love them, and so does the other parent, and people aren't always perfect, and they make mistakes, but that doesn't mean that they're not wonderful, and deserving. Take your child out, and do something fun, to get their mind off of things. Let the other parent have a different time to visit.

Lastly, there's times when the other parent has a lifestyle, or behavior, such was a question that was asked, with being an alcoholic. If they're so damaging that you need to take action, take action. Don't stick your head in the sand and pretend it's not happening. If you find out that your ex is leaving your five year old home alone, or there are indicators of abuse, this is when you really need to contact authorities, and protect your children. This may be getting Child Protective Services involved, or even the police, because it's your job to protect your kids.

If co-parenting isn't going to work, you can consider parallel parenting, which Jen is going to talk about.

Jennifer Banks:

Okay. I had mentioned the concept of parallel parenting a little bit earlier. Just kind of a little definition as to what parallel parenting is. It's a parenting arrangement, where divorced parents are able to co-parent, by disengaging from each other, and having limited contact directly with each other in situations where they have demonstrated that they cannot communicate in a respectful fashion. The first thing there is that, if there is a lot of hostility, parallel parenting can actually be a stepping stone, a starting point towards establishing a successful co-parenting relationship. The hopes of parallel parenting is that by starting out this kind of parenting relationship, this is going to allow that dust to settle, right after a divorce, or separation.

Because that's what you mentioned, it's a very tumultuous time for everyone involved in the family. In parallel parenting, parents are going to work separately to meet the best interest of the child. The communication in a parallel parenting relationship is where the communication is mostly written. It's written in the form, as mentioned earlier, in like a notebook, a calendar, or an email. When you do that communication, in a written kind of way, you want to keep in mind week-to-week parenting schedules, holiday schedules, because those can be pretty tedious. You want to keep in my school breaks, vacations, and any other kind of events that are to be included in your parenting plan.

We have a list of websites, here at the end of our webinar, that we're going to talk about. But one, about parallel parenting, that I want to point out, and I think somebody had actually mentioned it, is www.ourfamilywizard.com. What this website does is it offers parenting tools that will help establish a parenting

calendar or a visitation plan. The only thing about this website is there is a small fee. I did not look too much into it, to see how much it is, but I think it's a pretty low fee for that. But even on that website, if the parents are interested, it shows like a cell phone, and how this can actually be on your cell phone, easily accessible, so I would encourage families to check that out.

Parallel parenting, that's the kind of parenting that's going to reduce some stress and anxiety, in the hopes of making that dust settle. Because with parallel parenting, there is no longer that face-to-face interaction with that parent. That's not going to allow for any triggers. Lori's now going to move on to talk about eliminating putting children in unhealthy roles.

Lori Auten:

Okay. There are some good, general parenting guidelines for helping children adjust, and eliminating them from these unhealthy roles. One of these roles is using your child as a messenger. Don't involve children in communication between the two of you. If you're dropping off your child at the other parent's house and say, "Tell your dad I'm picking you up at two instead of three today." This puts the child in the middle of a situation where they don't need to be. I was a kid once, and do you think I'm going to remember a time change when I'm doing fun stuff with Dad? I don't think so. What if I do remember and dad has plans for us to see a movie, or something? So you're putting the child in the middle of a communication, which they shouldn't be in.

Using your child as a judge. This is trying to validate that there's a good parent and a bad parent. Sometimes parents try to buy their kids love and as lousy as you think your ex is, your child has a right to love both parents, and they can develop their own opinions about them later. Don't damage the positive images that your child has regarding both their parents. Try not to use your child as the reporter. Focus on which activities your child and your ex will be doing during the visit. Don't use your child to figure out what's going on with the other parent. Here's what happens is children end up becoming little spies and they end up with that double loyalty bond, because they want to be honest with both parents, if you're sticking them in the middle.

Lastly, don't use your child as a person to talk to when you get upset, or if you have a child that wants to help you, then set boundaries for that child. Using your children as a support, or letting them tell you everything's going to be okay, is going to keep them from making that healthy adjustment themselves.

Jennifer Banks:

Okay. I'm going to talk now about how family service workers can help parents going through this. We see this, as family service workers, every day, and these are just kind of some suggestions that we can offer our families who may be going through these kinds of situations. The first thing is provide emotional support to them. Active listen, listen to what they have to say, sit down, look them in the eye, hear them out, hear what they have to say and what they're going through. Ask questions on how the parents are feeling about going through this process. A lot of times, the best thing to do after that is summarize what you hear them saying. Let them know that you're listening to what they have to say and that you care what they have to say.

Share local resources. We had put here ... I know, at the family center, we do not give legal advice. But one thing we can do is refer them to any kind of service that might be able to give them that legal advice. At our agency, we have an awesome resource manual. I think most agencies have that. If need be, do some research as to how you can help people get those resources.

Another thing that you can do is refer the family to Child-focused Parenting. The first thing is to see if it's offered in your area. As I had mentioned earlier, TransParenting is pretty prominent curriculum and it's used in 29 different states. There is actually a nominal fee to take the TransParenting class, so if a parent cannot afford to take the class, see if there's a way that the fee can be waived. I know, in our county, we have somebody that works with our families that can waive that fee if need be.

I had mentioned earlier about a parenting plan. Assist your families in establishing that parenting plan. Sometimes having a family worker, on the outside, who's listening to all that, might think of something that the parent may not think about when doing the parenting plan. That might help them be more successful at establishing that.

The fourth thing we have written here is invite the parents to a Parent Café. Do you guys have knowledge as to what a Parent Café is? Okay. Just a little bit of information about what a Parent Café is. Parent Cafes, they build on the five strengthening protective factors. Again, just reiteration. Parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and the social and emotional competence of children. Parent Cafes build on those five strengthening protective factors.

They provide a safe environment, where parents can have intimate conversations about their families in the hopes that their families will be strengthened. Parent Cafes, they've been indicated that they reduce stress, they increase parents feeling of peace and well-being, and that they increase parenting knowledge. Parents will have the ability to discuss similar situations with other parents in a safe environment and that may lead to parent friendships and support. We have been implementing the Parent Cafes, in our county, for probably close to a year now. We have seen that parents that you think may not have a whole lot in common, they actually do come together, and find that common ground.

We've had parents become friends. That's good to expand their support system as well, if they could find that common ground. Suggest mediation to your families. I know, in our county, we do not have mediation in place, but we do have some resources that we can suggest our families go to. Mediation, it's a form of negotiation between the parents with the help of an unbiased mediator, who will assist those parents in reaching an agreement on custody, or any kind of parenting issues that they may have. Mediation, it's less abrasive, and it allows the parents to give input on how they will split the time among each parent, it's less costly, and it's going to eliminate the decision of a third, party, which would be the judge, the lawyers.

It's going to kind of eliminate them in setting the plans for their children. Custody mediators, those are the kind of people that are trained to deal with conflict, and will work with the parents, to create a plan that's going to meet both the children's and the parents needs. I just kind of wanted to ask the audience now, do you guys have any other suggestions as to how we, as family service workers, can help families going through a divorce or separation?

Allyson Fulton: Okay. So while we're waiting for some suggestions to come in, go ahead and type those in the question box, we do have a question that came in for our presenters. What happens when parents live in different ends of the state, or even in different states? So if they're far away from one another, how can co-parenting, or parallel parenting, support those families?

Jennifer Banks: Okay. Some suggestions, in that case, is telephone calls. They're going to be done at a specific time. Children need to be able to count on their parents, so knowing that they can talk to them at any point in time through a phone conversation, that's a good way to strengthen that. Letters, you could always write letters. Send postcards, videos, there's Skype now, just recordings on phone, any kind of video that you could send back and forth, is good to keep parents in the loop. Emails, text messages, those kinds of things, mail, or fax. Mailing, or faxing, that kind of can help keep parents in the loop, as far as schooling goes.

Parents you know like to put their kids A's on refrigerators, and stuff like that. So maybe if they're emailed, or faxed, to another parent, both parents could share in that pride and joy for that accomplishment. Long-distance parenting is kind of difficult, but there are ways to keep both parents in the loop.

Allyson Fulton: All right. Thank you. Here are some other ... Hold on, I lost my place on the questions. Okay. Some things that ... Some suggestions that came in, allow the child to make the choices. When divorce happens, you tend to overcompensate your loss by controlling the child's activities, et cetera. So helping the family to understand that the child will feel as if they have no say in those choices, so give them some choices. Let's see, prepare some written guidelines for parents. Like, around their participation in the program. So if it's a home visiting program, what that looks like.

Then, also don't worry you're seeing something a little bit different, but we're going to go back. Also, help them remember to keep the conversation of family well-being appropriate in front of the child. For the home visitors, have some go to phrases ready to steer the conversation back, if it does get inappropriate. For instance, think about ahead of time, like, if Mom says this, here's something I could say to get them back on track. Also, suggest to families to use the support of family and friends, and to remind them it's really important to ask for help, when needed.

Also, some folks do some supervised visitation, so if that's something that's needed, if your center has that ability to do that, that can be a that could be an

option for families that aren't quite there yet, to co-parent. It looks like that's those are the suggestions that we have so far. So ...

Jennifer Banks: Those were excellent suggestions. That one about the agency, using agency space, that was a great suggestion. Because sometimes families aren't sure where they can go to have a safe environment, where they can do their visitation with their children. I know at our office, we have a little area with toys and couches that's very comfortable, it's non-threatening, so that was an excellent suggestion. They all were really great suggestions and we thank you for that.

Lori Auten: Somebody had mentioned a question, or made a suggestion about letting the child have some choices. One thing I wanted to mention about that, is the child should never have Choice whether to visit the other parent or not. When the child is younger, they need as much stability, and routine, as possible. If they do not want to visit the other parent you can always kind of remind them of what good times they had last time, or suggest, if they didn't have a good time, you could go somewhere else, like to a park, or to a movie, or something. But as the child gets older, like into the teenage years, that's when they can start making some more choices. Because I know, like when I was 15, and it was Friday night, I didn't want to be with my dad. I wanted to be out with my friends, so they're just going to resist the visit.

Once the child gets, you know, towards the teenager years, that's when your visitation may be compromised a little bit, and they may ... Like the previous slides I've showed you, you may have a visit that only lasts a couple minutes, but at least you're getting time with that other parent, so I just wanted to make that comment.

Jennifer Banks: Another suggestion ... I know, in our next slide we're going to talk about helpful websites. You're going to see that there's a website up there. It's called uptoparents.org. It's for divorcing, and divorced, parents. One thing we could do, as family service workers, to help with this process, Lori had mentioned about maybe talk about a fun time that you had with that other parent, there is an actual activity on uptoparents.org, where I think it's called 10 compliments or good memories. What the activity is supposed to do is, help the parent go back to the situation they were prior to the divorce. Think, there had to be at least 10 good times, or memories, that you can think of.

That's going to help the parent sit there, and think about, oh there was positive things in this relationship, there was positive things that came out of it. It is very difficult. Thinking of 10 things to say good about that other person. I actually was joking around with my husband one day and I said, "Let's do this." Coming up with five was really tricky. That website is really awesome.

So, as family service workers, there is some activities that you may want to sit down with your families to work with work on with them and that might help.

Lori Auten: Just to wrap some things up here, I just wanted to comment that the last three websites are now combined into one, and it's all on uptoparents.org. This is the

site that is recommended by the TransParenting curriculum. Cmoptions.org, this is a child maintenance option website. This site provides help with living cost for a child. Like, you have your ex who says, "I'm spending all this money and I'm contributing towards your rent." Well actually, if you would like a financial calculator, to figure out who's paying for what, and how much it's costing to raise a child. Like food, and clothes, ballet lessons, and it gives you a lot of financial information. It also will let you know if your current maintenance arrangement is the best for your circumstances.

There's also some practical help in dealing with separation. There's some tips on emotional support and how to manage your new financial situation. Then, it can also help you find other organizations, which can give you specific advice. We also talked about Our Family Wizard. Jen talk about this briefly, this talks about ... This is a good third-party situation. If your parallel parenting, where you are using the third party as you go up between you and the ex, this can keep and online schedule. There's also an app for your phone, and you can schedule a custody arrangements, track your parenting time, share all the important family information, and you can also manage some of your expenses, and you can create a clear log of any communication that you have with your ex.

So that is all we have for today and I thank you for joining us.

Allyson Fulton:

Excellent. Thank you so much, to Lori and Jen, for spending some time with us this morning/ before we wrap up today. I would like to open it up one more time for questions/ if you have any questions. Or comments. That you have at this moment. Please do share those. Michelle is watching that question box to share, again, any of those questions or comments, so please do.

I just wanted to comment, myself, that I thought it was so important, towards the beginning, when I think it was Jen who was talking about how important it is to explain separation and divorce to children. We kind of, as parents, often make assumptions that, well, we're doing this, and they know what's happening. But being able to explain that to the child, allowing the child, or children, to ask questions, probably is a really important reminder for all of us that work with families, who again are going through these challenging times.

I'm just going to pause a moment, to see if any questions or comments have come in. Then, we'll go ahead and wrap up today's presentation. Okay. So it looks like someone is wondering about getting a copy of the PowerPoint presentation today. Just so you know, you can go over to the handouts section of your gotowebinar, control panel, and download the slides there. Also, when we send out ... You'll get a link to the recording of this PowerPoint with your evaluation, with that PowerPoint recording, there might be slides available as well.

I don't see any other questions in there, but we'll leave it open for just a few minutes to see what comes in. Then, the one thing I did want to note, that I thought was really interesting, I'm glad you pointed this out, is pointing out that this is a really difficult situation for everyone involved. You touched on the

importance of self-care, and I think that's a really, really important piece, because it does take a while to get through that. I like that you went through the stages of grief too, and that everybody's going through that. Bothh parents, the children, everyone's going through that. I guess part of our role, as family support professionals, is to support everybody at those different stages, and to understand, and to be gentle when we need to be gentle, and give support and direct advice when needed.

It looks like we do have one other question here. This question is around teens that are co-parenting within their parents homes. Now, I'm going to go out on a limb, and meaning, like the co-parenting relationship between the teen and their parent. Like, so Grandma and Grandpa, and the Teen, and the child, or do you mean co-parenting with the partner that is not living in the same home? So I just ... Maybe you could clarify, by typing in, Angela, to your question there, but anything specific on co-parenting with teens? Or even that relationship of co-parenting that happens between grandparents and a teen that's living in the home? Okay, so here is some clarification. So the teen and the child's parent and the relationship with the grandparents.

So there's a co-parenting relationship within the home, because you have Grandma and Grandpa parenting, and the Teen parent, so do some of these things that are related to co-parenting apply there and maybe what are some of the, dare I say landmines, that might come up?

Jennifer Banks:

That is a really good question. Because I think we're seeing more, and more, where grandparents are taking in their grandchildren, and raising them, so they also have to communicate with the biological parents of the children. I feel that a lot of the same things would apply to that. Being that throughout their teens, sometimes that kind of throws a monkey wrench in it too, because teens are tricky little individuals. It's pretty common for your teens to have anxiety about money, and stuff like that, so I think the grandparents and the parents still need to kind of have those conversations away from the teens even though they're old enough to understand. Sometimes, I think that could be a little bit more harmful for them. I would say that probably most of it does apply in that kind of situation too, even though it is a little bit tricky.

Allyson Fulton:

Well, and I'm thinking, one of the things that you're pointing out, that some of the same things do apply, but helping to establish, like ... And communicate. That communication part. Like, here's the way that we're going to deal with this kind of behavior, here's the way we're going to deal with this kind of behavior, that kind of thing, so that they're on the same page. Because I imagine that the child, it could be detrimental to the child, to have Grandma and Grandpa parenting one way, and Mom, or Dad, parenting another way. So that communication would definitely be helpful. You know, and maybe they don't have to come up with a parenting plan, but they might use some of the same concepts to come up with like a shared agreement of how they're going to approach raising this child together. Because they really are, kind of, raising that child together.

I don't see any other questions, that have come in, so I think we might ... Oh, no, wait, here we go, oh, aha, Angela keeps telling us what she means here. This is good. Clarification. So speaking of teen parents, the double-whammy of the parents conflicting with their parent, and the teen's dad's desire to parent their child. Yeah, you're right, that would be a lot. Then plus, you have, you know, it's almost like you have these three sets of parents, co-parenting, then, is what it sounds like. I don't know if you have anything to add, Jennifer or Lori?

Lori Auten:

I actually have a family, I'm visiting right now, who is sort of going through this situation. They're not teen parents, but they had to move back into their own parents homes. So you have the dad, and the four-year-old child, and the grandparents co-parenting. What I'm finding is the grandparents are trying to be grandparents and not following the rules that the father suggests. So you have dad who says, no cookies until after dinner, and then you have the grandparents sneaking the cookies, because they just want to be loved, and be those grandparents. So it can get really difficult, when you have two people that are co-parenting in different ways, and they both think that they're doing the best, they both have the best interest of the child in the mind.

So this might be a good idea to develop a plan with these parents, or maybe even getting a mediator involved. Like a neutral third party, because it's really difficult to tell your parents, you know, "Hey, don't do this, this is my kid." Because you're also living under the same roof, so getting a third party involved might be the best deal here.

Allyson Fulton:

Excellent thank you for taking some time to answer those questions as they have come in here, at the end of our webinar today. I again, want to thank both Lori and Jen, for taking time with us today, sharing this information regarding the TransParenting program that they are offering in Columbia County, at the family center. So ladies, thank you so much for your time and effort with this. Again, I mentioned at the beginning, we are going to be sending the electronic evaluation via email. Please do take some time. It'll only take a couple of minutes for you to complete that survey.

One, it helps our presenter if you share information regarding the what was offered today. It helps us, as organizers for these sessions, to be better able to prepare for the future sessions that we are going to offer. You will see, coming up on September 6th, we have a session called Developing Relationships with Families. The registration for that will be out momentarily. That will be out here by the end of the week, so please watch your email for that registration. It will also be up at our Pennsylvania Parents as Teachers website.

You can see that we have not announced titles or topics for the October and November session. One of the reasons is because, right now, is the professional development survey, that comes out from our family support office. Everyone should have received that survey, all parent educators, supervisors, directors, CPF grantees, partners that we have within our family support program. So please take a couple of minutes, complete that professional development survey

for us. that is what guides our future efforts in terms of our webinar and our training is that we offer.

A little bit different this year. We kind of took what were the interest for topics in last year survey and we're asking you to flush out those topics a little more for us, so that if we need to go deeper in some certain topics, we can do so. Again, just take a couple minutes, complete that survey, that is due on the 18th, so you have a week and a half to complete that. We'll be sending a reminder out. So if you missed that, in your email the first time, please know a reminder will be coming, and so you should see that again.

Also, as it is stated up there, you can join in multiple ways. So using laptops, mobile devices is fine. Again, we encourage folks that aren't able to join us during the live session, to view that archived session. Which, again, they're listed on our Pennsylvania Parents as Teachers website. So we thank you for joining us today. This does conclude the webinar. Have a wonderful afternoon.