



Parallel Parenting – A form of joint custody

For when parents don't agree on how, but neither is "bad".

At about 2 years of age children don't yet know how to share, but may enjoy each other's company. They happily play *beside* each other, each with their own toy. By about 3 years of age, children are learning to share and can then play *with* each other as in the case of rolling a ball back and forth. Developmentally, children thus move from parallel play to cooperative play.

Parenting post-separation can mimic these two distinct stages of children's development.

Where parents can agree on parenting styles, routines, diet, religion, school, etc, they can practice cooperative parenting. The parents may themselves have irreconcilable differences with respect to each other, but they are in agreement with regards to the parenting of their children. The children go easily from one parent's home to the other. Rules and routines remain fairly consistent. Clothing, schoolbooks, notices, etc., are easily shared.

While it is best for children when their parents can get along, or at least resist conflict, negotiate and agree on parenting matters, not all parents are thus capable. Second best is when parents can agree not to intrude on each other's life and decisions and at least establish clear rules for parenting when each is responsible for the care of the children even if the rules differ between households.

When the conflict between the parents extends to matters involving the children and they cannot reconcile the differences, then parallel parenting may offer a solution for both to remain meaningfully involved. In these cases, parents do have different rules and routines, different parenting styles, different religious beliefs and practices and may be poor at sharing clothing, books notices, etc. Parallel parenting allows each parent to carry on in their own way with the

understanding that neither will intrude on the other.

Even though parents may carry on with their differences, for parallel parenting to work, there must still be agreement on the issue of choosing a school, religion, medical care and the like. With parallel parenting, these matters may be negotiated; each parent may be assigned their own span of authority; or the parents can agree to the use of an arbitrator.

Some argue that different rules, routines, etc., can be confusing to children. However these differences are often overcome in a matter of weeks to months. Just as children learn the rules of each classroom teacher, group leader or coach, they learn the rules of each parent. To make it work though, the parents must agree not to meddle or undermine each other's rules. The child must be given a clear message from both parents that even though the rules or routines may differ, they must respect both.

Parallel parenting is indicated in those situations where the parents differ but where neither parent's decisions are truly harmful. The parents may be in conflict, but they are able to control themselves, minimize their interactions and follow an agreed upon plan. Parallel parenting is contra-indicated in those cases where parents continue to undermine each other's authority, cannot resist conflict or engage in behaviour that may be harmful to the children.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.