
The Art of Co-parenting

The Dorm Parent Collective

Objectives

- Navigate unique family dynamics without sacrificing effectiveness
- Learn strategies for effective parenting in the wake of disagreement
- Converse & connect with fellow families

Family Systems

Family System:

A household of people who (generally) live together, interact, and depend on one another for needs and emotional support.

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory is a theory that views the family as a complex system of interconnected and interdependent individuals.

DESCRIPTION

Family systems theory understands human behavior through a complex web of emotional processes in one's family, work, and social systems. It describes how the emotional interdependence among family/society members impacts individuals' character and life choices.

ASSUMPTIONS

- 1 The family is a complex emotional unit
- 2 The family is emotionally interconnected
- 3 Familial, community, and social relationships are reciprocal

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Family System

When a loved **one** is experiencing mental, behavioral, and/or physical health challenges, it impacts the individual **and** can impact each member of their **family** as well as the family **unit** as a whole.

- When siblings are children: less/no understanding; feelings of neglect or being forgotten
- When siblings are adolescents: genetic fears; difficulty navigating complex emotions like shame, anger, frustration, resentment, guilt
- When siblings are adults: take on personal responsibility, avoid family involvement
- Partner/s: disconnection, disjointed, role confusion, loss of social activities

A Family Systems Approach

When we work with individual clients at the Dorm, we also know it's important to address the larger family system.

- Essential for **long-lasting change**
- An opportunity for **family members to examine their own issues** and opens the door for **change and healing for all**

Reflect:

- What is **YOUR** role in the family system? Your partners? Each of your children?
- On the impact of **generational roots**; a chance to **rewrite the family script**

Family Roles

Hero: This is the “good” and “responsible” child. May struggle to play, relax, follow others, or allow others to be right.

Rescuer: Focuses on others’ needs, emotions, & problem-solves for others in the family. May have difficulty with conflict.

Mediator: peacekeeper, buffer

Scapegoat/Black sheep: seen as the member who needs to most help; may be “identified patient”

Truth Teller: This person reflects the system as it is. At times the challenge is how that information is relayed.

Power broker: This person works at maintaining a hierarchy in the family with him/herself at the top.

Lost child: The lost child is the subservient good child. Often quiet or hidden individual.

Clown: use of humor to navigate family situations

Cheerleader: The cheerleader provides support and encouragement to others.

Nurturer: This person provides emotional support, creates safety, is available to others, and can be a mediator.

Thinker: The thinker provides the objective, reasoning focus. Uses logic, struggles with emotions

Each Family Has Its Own Style & Equilibrium

We have to consider the **balance** that exists in each unique family which may include:

- Family members' **expectations** (spoken or unspoken)
- Family **dynamics** (relationships, boundaries, enmeshment, triangulation, differentiation)
- The management or avoidance of conflict; expression of feelings
- **Communication** with the outside world and the roles which they are assigned
- Balanced **boundaries**:
 - A closed family system where it is difficult to request or receive help
 - An overly porous family system where rules and expectations are inconsistent

Start with The Basics

Identify & clarify parenting roles. Families come in all shapes and sizes, which means there can be multiple parents involved in an adult child's life. These boundaries should be made clear with each other without your child's input.

Leave your ego at the door. The best conversations come when we can approach them with **curiosity** and **openness** to one another's points of view without judgment or agenda.

Know when to press pause. Parenting is complicated and emotional. Tensions will rise and they will die down again in every co-parenting relationship. Know for yourself and for the relationship when it's time to take a beat and come back.

(sidenote: in crisis situations this may not always be possible – which is why clarifying roles from the get go can be a good fall back)

United Front – What/Why/How

What does it mean to present a united front?

- To have an agreed-upon approach to an issue.
- This does not mean you cannot have your own unique parenting personality or approach, it's about clear decision-making.

Why is this important?

Children need to know what's expected of them. Varying guidelines create confusion and more room for “splitting” – when your child plays one parent off against the other.

How do we come together?

- Make time for discussion of topics you differ on *privately*, determining what values are most important to you as a family and using those to help inform decisions.
- Put what's best for your children before your ego. If one parent makes a snap-judgement, it is best for the other to support it.
- If an issue arises with both parents present, it is fine to let your child know that you need to discuss it **first** before giving a decision.

When Disagreements Arise

We still want to present a **united front** – and there are options to get there. All involve **compromise** and **flexibility**.

- Decide based on which parent the issue is more important to
- Go with the more cautious path
- Decide based on which parent has more relevant expertise
- Decide based on which parent is going to be more impacted by the decision
- When all else fails, flip a coin... not really, but decide based on equity between both parents

Keep in mind that you are both on the **same team!** You both love and want what is best for your child. There will be different paths and decisions to be made – work on getting away from seeing options as “wrong” or “right” and acknowledge they are different.

Splitting

Splitting occurs when your child senses disagreement between people and plays one person (in this case parent) off against the other.

Splitting may also entail lying, telling one parent one thing and the other parent another. This is most likely to occur when the child senses “weakness” in the alignment of the parents. It creates a “he said/she said” dynamic that takes the attention away from the actual issue at hand.

A similar issue to splitting occurs when one parent allies with the child, leaving the other parents to be the “bad guy,” and often driving a wedge in the parent relationship.

An aligned parenting style often results in stronger relationships between parents, leaves little space for splitting to occur, and helps your child to understand and respect boundaries. In addition to making for a more effective family dynamic, this is important practice for the real world.

Key Things To Remember

1. **Appear aligned.** You don't have to agree on an issue to present as aligned to your children – you have to “appear” to agree (ie. no eye rolling, heavy signing, nonverbals that show discord) This does mean putting your ego aside, though.
2. **Prioritize the big issues.** Aligning on everything will not be possible. Prioritize the issues that matter most.
3. **When in doubt, team it out.** You can always step back from a conversation to talk to your partner/other parent/parent coach before arriving at a decision.
4. **Sometimes plans change.** Sometimes one approach doesn't work. This isn't a failure, this is informative and gives your family the opportunity to come together to adjust, communicate, refine, etc.

Correcting for Imbalance in The Family

- **Educate** & encourage curiosity!
 - **Motivate** the family system for engagement while being trauma responsive
 - **Acknowledge** impact, validate
 - **De-pathologize** the family system
 - Change our language: denial as fierce protection
 - **Change** our *patterns*: use of coping skills & communication
 - **Engage** in activities to support health
- Paradigm shift
 - The younger the client or the more profound the mental illness, generally the needier the family → **connect to more resources**
 - **Address** chronic wear and tear
 - **Create** *protective* factors for individuals and the family system including *support* and *safety*
 - **Balance** between your needs & needs of the person

Reflection

Am I clear in my role in the co-parenting relationship – Is this role intentional or a default?

Where do most setbacks occur in decision-making and communication?

What is the hardest part about parenting (for me)? How does this impact my ability to co-parent effectively?

References

- **Family Education - “Parenting: Developing a Unified Front”**
<https://www.familyeducation.com/life/discipline-strategies/parenting-developing-unified-front>