

SESSION 7: PARENTING AS A TEAM

INTRODUCTION

In the last session, you learned more about what happens when parents don't pay child support. When parents are separated, the noncustodial parent has a duty to share in the financial costs of raising his or her child and the custodial parent often needs that support to make ends meet. As you've heard over and over, children are expensive. Money is one of the big issues that can cause conflict between two parents who've ended their romantic relationship, but still need to raise their child together.

There are also other issues that get in the way of parents working cooperatively. Consider this story told by Martin, age 23, and Angelica, age 22, parents of Maria, age 5:

Martin's Story:

"I didn't have a very good relationship with Angelica when Maria was born. I wasn't happy when Angelica told me she was pregnant so I guess I sort of disappeared for a while. When I showed up at the hospital for Maria's birth, Angelica gave me the cold shoulder. But when I held Maria that first time, I was overwhelmed with feelings of love. I vowed to be a good father. It's been hard because there are so many bad feelings between me and Angelica. I met Vanessa when Maria was two years old. We got married two years ago and now we have a son, Martin Jr."

Angelica's Story:

"Martin just showed up at the hospital after being missing in action for months! I figured I got through the pregnancy alone so I could raise Maria alone, too. My mom hated Martin and encouraged me to move on. But, since I grew up without my father, I wanted Maria to have a dad in her life. We signed the AOP and I decided to open a child support case. Martin pays the monthly child support without fail. Things blew up when Martin took my daughter around another woman. I would always ask Maria what she did with her dad and she told me about somebody named Vanessa. She said her daddy and Vanessa were kissing. I called Martin and told him not to ever take my daughter around his girlfriends. He came over to talk face-to-face and we had a big fight in front of Maria. Maria was crying so hard that Martin just left."

Postscript:

Martin hasn't seen Maria for almost two years. Angelica moved to Los Angeles to take a job. It's too far to drive and Martin hasn't been able to afford a plane ticket. He has a video phone call with Maria once or twice a month. Every time they talk, Maria asks her dad why he doesn't come see her and if he loves her.

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Questions to Consider

What's your reaction to this story?

Put yourself in Maria's shoes. How do you think she's doing? How's the relationship between her parents affecting her?

What are the challenges that keep Martin and Angelica from working cooperatively to do what's best for Maria?

Perhaps you said that Maria is suffering because her parents have so much conflict in their relationship. When children witness conflict at home or between their parents, they're more likely to be aggressive, or violent or depressed or to use substances or act out in other ways. It's never good for one parent to say negative things to a child about the other parent. Because children are part of both mom and dad, they long to have a loving relationship with both mom and dad. Clearly, Maria is wishing she could have a closer relationship with her dad.

TEAM PARENTING

Have you ever been on a team? Maybe you've been on a sports team, like basketball or soccer, or maybe you've been on a debate team or student council.

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What does it mean to act as a team? Think about some of the teams you've been on. How did people work together? How successful was the team? Effective teams must communicate and cooperate to achieve a common goal.

Let's think about parents like Martin and Angelica as a team. What would be their common goal?

Perhaps you said they both want to raise a healthy and happy child. Usually, parents want the best for their children. Who else besides the mother and father might share the goal of helping a particular child grow up healthy and happy? Often grandparents, aunts, uncles, other relatives, neighbors, friends, teachers, mentors, health care workers, childcare workers, and counselors help a child grow up successfully.

A parenting team includes the mother and father – regardless of the status of their romantic relationship – and any other key people who will support those parents in raising their child.

Here are five skills that can help team members communicate and cooperate so they can achieve the goal of raising a child successfully.

Five Skills for Effective Team Parenting

1. **Be polite and respectful.** Be this way with your child's other parent and all team members who support you in raising your child. If you can't be friendly, be businesslike – the way you would treat someone you have to work with.
2. **Keep your child out of the middle.** When issues come up between you and your child's parent, keep them between the two of you. Don't ever say negative things to your child about his or her other parent or the other team members. Don't argue in front of the child. Don't send messages through your child.
3. **Communicate effectively.** Listen to each other. Share important information about the child in a timely manner. Make requests in a polite manner. Admit when you've made a mistake and apologize.
4. **Ask for help when you need it.** Speak up. Ask for what you need. Give thanks and show appreciation when you get help.
5. **Be dependable.** Do what you say you're going to do. Honor your commitments. Be someone your child and other team members can count on.

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How could these skills have helped Maria's parents? How could Angelica's mother become an active and positive parenting team member? Give some examples.

Communication Skills

Being a good parent isn't easy. You have to master lots of skills to be successful. What do you do when you have a concern you want to express? How do you manage when you and the other parent see things completely differently? How do you respond when the other parent or your child is upset or sad? How do you handle it when you're mad at the other parent and your child is around? What do you do to make sure everyone stays updated on important events and issues? How do you show appreciation to build good feelings in the relationship? The same skills that will help you be a good parent can help you with any important relationship, such as marriage. The good news is that these skills can be learned, and now is a good time to begin practicing for future commitments, like parenthood and marriage.

What skills (*not feelings*) does a person need to build a successful relationship with a child, partner, spouse, or co-parent? List the skills below. Be as specific as possible.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

What can you do right away to begin practicing the skills you listed above?

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Rate yourself on the following communication skills on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being lousy and 5 being practically perfect. Think of a specific example from your life to back up your rating.

Communication Skill	Rating: 1=Lousy 3=Average 5=Practically Perfect				
	1	2	3	4	5
Being a good listener					
Being able to clearly state what your problem is, without turning it into a personal attack					
Being able to find compromises					
Being able to see things from another person's point of view					
Being able to admit when you're wrong and then make changes					
Being able to show appreciation when someone does something positive					

ACTIVITY: Advice on Team Parenting

Think about the parents in each of the two stories below. Answer these questions:

- What are the plusses in their relationship?
- What do they need to work on to make things better for them and for their child?
- Which of the five team parenting skills would help their relationship?

Once you've answered these questions for each story, give each set of parents some advice for becoming an effective parenting team.

STORY 1: Terrell and Jennifer

Terrell, age 24, and Jennifer, age 19, have a 3-year-old daughter named Daisy. Jennifer and Daisy live with Jennifer's parents. Terrell was supportive of Jennifer throughout her pregnancy and he was in the delivery room when their baby was born. Terrell has a wonderful, warm relationship with his daughter.

When Daisy was just 18 months old, she had a very high fever and had to be taken to the hospital. Terrell drove her there with Jennifer, and stayed with them even though his manager threatened to fire him, and then did. The baby recovered, and now Terrell sees Jennifer and the baby almost every day — and he has extra time because he's unemployed. He rarely has any money to help Jennifer. They sometimes fight about Terrell's unemployment. It seems to Jennifer that he's not even trying to find a job or continue his education so he can get another one.

ACTIVITY: Advice on Team Parenting *Continued*

Jennifer takes classes at the community college and works hard to get good grades. She reads to Daisy every night, keeps her very well groomed and dressed, and has already taught her to be very polite. Although Jennifer is gentle with Daisy, she isn't affectionate and she's very strict. Terrell complains to Jennifer that she's too uptight, and he thinks Daisy should be able to be a kid and have more fun. Jennifer's parents are very frustrated with Terrell because he doesn't help support Daisy financially. They often say rude things to him when he comes to see Jennifer and Daisy.

What are the plusses in this story?

What needs work?

What team parenting skills would help these parents and grandparents?

Give these parents some advice:

STORY 2: Kenny and Shari

Kenny quit school to get a job to support his son, Rudy, who is now almost 5 years old. Kenny's a salesman in a furniture store and makes decent money with commissions. He pays his child support in full, on time, every month, and maintains regular contact with Shari, Rudy's mother. Kenny picks Rudy up faithfully every Saturday afternoon, and after doing something fun for an hour or two, he drops Rudy off at his parents' home to spend the night. Kenny has never spent a whole day with Rudy and works overtime most weekends.

ACTIVITY: Advice on Team Parenting *Continued*

Shari dropped out of school when she got pregnant and is living in an upstairs apartment behind her parent's house that they fixed up for her and her son. Shari's very affectionate with Rudy and never denies him anything. She also has lots of girlfriends who dote on Rudy. On most days, Shari goes to the mall where she buys toys and cute little suits for Rudy, as well as clothes and make-up and jewelry for herself.

Kenny and Shari have started arguing quite a bit... sometimes in front of Rudy. Kenny complains that Shari should be working and saving some of the money he gives her instead of shopping and playing all day. Shari thinks Kenny works too much and should be spending more time with her and Rudy. She doesn't want a job and prefers to stay home with Rudy.

What are the plusses in this story?

What needs work?

What team parenting skills would help these parents?

Give these parents some advice:
