

# 4.

## **Make It Better or Keep It Bitter**

Choosing My Personal Path



## Purpose of Realignment

The only reason for a continued relationship after divorce is to ensure the best environment for bringing up your children. Therefore the new relationship between parents is built on the principle of addressing the needs of the children.

## Working Relationship/Business Relationship

The new relationship between co-parents is often compared to a business or working relationship. In the space provided, list some of the characteristics of a good business or working relationship. What are the guidelines that make a business relationship work?

### *Characteristics of a Business Relationship*

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## Guidelines for a Business Relationship

Although your list of the characteristics found in a good, working relationship may differ, there are likely to be similarities. See if your list includes any of these characteristics.

### ***1. The individuals in a business relationship are dedicated to a common goal.***

A business relationship often means working in partnership to fulfill a contract, meet an obligation or manufacture a product. It can also mean that the vendor and purchaser work together to meet their respective schedule and pricing needs. In all cases the relationship exists because there is a common purpose involved.

What's the common purpose in co-parenting? It's to raise children who are emotionally and physically healthy. Co-parents share this purpose and can work together to meet this common objective.

### ***2. The individuals are committed to a win-win relationship.***

If both participants are committed to a win-win relationship, the business relationship will continue for a long time. However, if either one of the parties moves toward a win-lose position—trying to gain the upper hand or take advantage of the other—the relationship will deteriorate or be broken off.



Co-parents in business relationships also observe common courtesies. They too call to make an appointment when a topic needs to be discussed rather than catching the person at transition times. Co-parents notify the other party when there is a change that affects their common objective (such as something going on in the child's life at school) and they keep the other parent current on policies (such as the new schedule for sports practice or dance lessons). They share rather than hoard information, such as letting the other parent know about report card grades or appointments with school personnel. Voice tones are pleasant and requests are made rather than demands.

**6. *The individuals communicate with facts, not feelings.***

In a business relationship, the two parties expect to have differences which they must negotiate. However, during the communication itself, feelings are put aside so that they do not interfere. It is understood that sarcasm, whining, demanding, placating, moralizing, advising and/or complaining will only reduce the chances of a satisfactory outcome to the discussion. Clear, unemotional communication that uses facts to move toward solutions to problems increases the chances for continuing a viable, long-term relationship.

In a realigned relationship, co-parents need to communicate with facts rather than feelings. Emotions tend to interfere with the problem-solving process and reduce the chances for a successful relationship. Since the co-parents are no longer responsible for emotional support, emotions should not play a part in their continued communication. When emotions are set aside, the two people can better work toward finding solutions to any outstanding problems.

**Removing emotions from communication does not mean denying them. Find another time or place to express them safely where they will be less likely to negatively influence the co-parent relationship and your child.**

Check below indicating which of these business relationship skills you already use with the co-parent. Then place an X on the behaviors/skills you have not mastered.

1. \_\_\_ I work toward common goals with the co-parent.
2. \_\_\_ I work toward a win-win arrangement rather than for me to win.
3. \_\_\_ I use negotiation skills when attempting to resolve issues with the co-parent.
4. \_\_\_ I stay focused on addressing only one topic at a time.
5. \_\_\_ I treat the co-parent with respect and I demonstrate this by common courtesy.
6. \_\_\_ I am able to discuss details or concerns without becoming emotional.

## **Summary**

Realignment for parents following divorce means forming a relationship that differs in structure from the old parenting relationship. The framework of a business relationship helps to define guidelines that work for this new structure. The realigned relationship limits the emotional involvement of the two parties. Instead a structure is established that allows the two parties to communicate about their child's welfare, solve problems, negotiate solutions and share valuable information so that both parents will realize their mutual goal of providing for the emotional well-being of the child.



**STOP AND ASK YOURSELF . . .**

If my child/ren were asked to complete the following sentence, how would they honestly answer?

My \_\_\_\_\_ is the good guy, and my \_\_\_\_\_ is the bad guy.

Have you contributed to this simplistic, black-and-white reasoning? If so, how?

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Has your explanation about the divorce reflected blame? If so, what can be done to correct this? For example: Create a simple “nonblaming” explanation.

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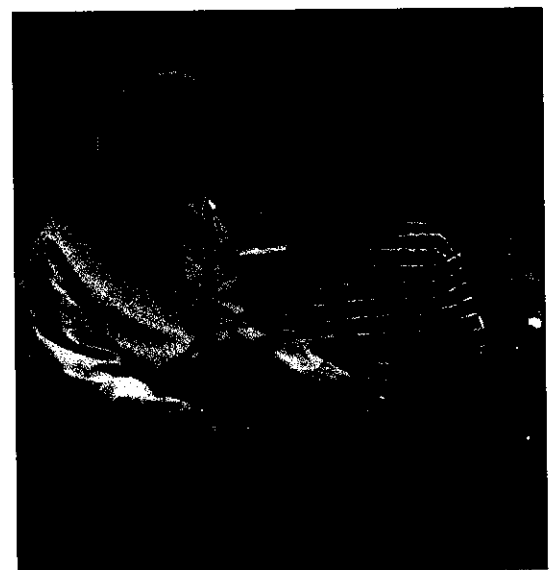
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**Expectations**

Similar to assumptions are the adults’ underlying expectations of each other. We all form expectations of others’ behavior based on our observations of their actions in the past. However, those expectations get us in trouble when we don’t allow them to change. It has been said that “the past does not necessarily equal the future.” People do grow and change. Divorce sometimes causes those changes. So if, years after the divorce, one parent still thinks of the other as dependent, verbally abusive or uninvolved with their own children, they might be wrong. And they could send the wrong message to their children all due to their own limited vision. It’s better to expect the best and encourage your co-parent to live up to these expectations. Your children will be the beneficiaries of your good will.



Another example are the words used to describe the new family arrangement. When one parent says, "My kids don't live with me anymore. Their mother has custody," the speaker sounds like he is no longer an important member of the family. Look how the emphasis changes when a parent instead says, "My kids live with their other parent during the week and with me on the weekend." If you are the parent who sees your children on the weekend, do you think you'd be cooperative with your co-parent if you thought that he/she still has a family and you don't? Wouldn't you be vengeful? Language really makes a difference in attitudes.

After you complete the exercise, circle the problem language that you might use. Now focus on a healthier expression. Remember, your child will also reflect these changes.

## Refusal to Realign

The last obstacle to realignment, then, is a parent's refusal to emotionally disengage. This occurs because the parent is getting something out of the continued attachment. He or she obtains a benefit for his or her own purposes. He gets a sense of power when he uses methods of control. It may be a way to get attention when she plays the victim or an attempt to get revenge for being hurt in the past. In children we call these actions misbehavior; in adults we say it's an inappropriate way to meet their needs. Let's see how that works.

### Poor Me

*Oh, I did everything right. I gave him the best years of my life . . . and what did I get? Kicked in the teeth! Why do these things always happen to me? He wanted the divorce, not me.*

*She has always used me. She said she loved me but she didn't. She never did . . .*

*I can't afford to take you to the movies like your father can because he's got all the money.*

*I just can't do it on my own. I can't raise these kids on the money he gives me. I helped him through school. Now what do I get? Dumped for his secretary. Life isn't fair, even when you do everything right.*

Do you see what is similar about these examples? The speakers are playing the part of victim, manipulating others into giving them undue attention. Why? Because they get a payoff for this behavior. They get the reward of attention from family and friends who rush to their aid. In fact, the attention is so rewarding that seeking attention for themselves takes precedence over the needs of their children.

### Control

*I'll send the child support when I'm good and ready!*

*I don't have to show you his report card; you can call the teacher.*

*I know I said you could take the kids on vacation, but I've changed my mind.*

*I don't have to tell you who her doctor is. It doesn't say anything in the court order.*

*It says in the court order that you're supposed to call between 7 and 8:00. Its 8:10 so you can't talk to her.*



For example, you might become bitter and say, "Your father always finds girlfriends who can pay his way." Or, you may find a way to block the visit.

Step 2. Now think about taking an action based on your child's best interests. What would you say or do? Write down your reactions below next to "Example 1" in the right column. For example, you might say, "I'm glad you will be able to see the circus."

**Example 2**

Your child's band concert is scheduled for an evening that falls during the time he lives with you. Your son asks you if he can invite his mother/father to the concert.

Step 1. Think about reacting in your own self-interest. What would you say or do? Write down your reactions below next to "Example 2" in the left column. For instance, you might become angry and say, "No, it is not your mother's/father's night to see you!" Or, you might play the victim and say, "Well, I guess you can, but you know how nervous I get when your father is around."



Step 2. Now think about taking an action based on your child's best interests. What would you say or do? Write down your reactions below next to "Example 2" in the right column. For instance, you might say, "Sure, it will be nice for your mother/father to see how much you have accomplished this year in band."

**SELF INTEREST**  
(Position)

**CHILD INTEREST**  
(Interest)

If you took a position of self interest, what would you do?

If you took the position of your child's best interest, what would you do?

Example 1  
Say?/Do?

Say?/Do?

Example 2  
Say/Do?

Say?/Do?

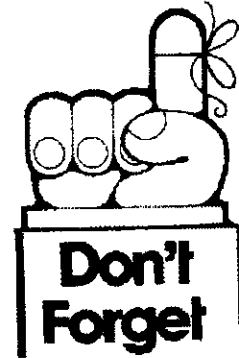


# Exercise

## MY BUSINESS-LIKE BEHAVIORS

The six qualities of a business relationship include:

- Dedication to a Common Goal
- Commitment to a Win-Win Relationship
- Negotiation of Differences
- Focus on a Single Topic
- Observation of Common Courtesies
- Communication with Facts, Not Feelings



**Directions:** Keep track of your interactions with the co-parent. Watch for the six qualities of a business relationship. Focus on what you do to make the interactions more effective. Record your behaviors below. You may include phone contact with your co-parent. At this point do not worry about the outcome of the interactions, just concentrate on learning new skills. Remember, you can only control your behaviors.

**Date**

**Skill**

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# CLARIFYING BOUNDARIES

In a business relationship you generally have a sense of boundaries. In the past you and your co-parent shared an intimate relationship. That makes it difficult to establish new boundaries—new rules for the relationship. To realign your relationship as co-parents, boundaries must be addressed. As you realign your relationship it will be difficult to determine what is and is not your business. The following activity may help you and your co-parent clarify your boundaries.

**Directions:** Read each item below and decide if you should discuss the issue with your co-parent. Assume that you and the co-parent have a joint legal arrangement. Remember you and your co-parent are business partners. It may be difficult to determine if you should or should not address the issue. When in doubt, assume that it is NOT your business. Place an X under the appropriate column.

ISSUE	My Business?	Not My Business?
1. The co-parent got a new job.		
2. The co-parent is dating.		
3. You are not sure who is sitting for your child when the co-parent is out.		
4. You are not sure how the co-parent is spending the child-support money.		
5. You wonder how late the co-parent stays out in the evening.		
6. The co-parent has been going out drinking when the children are with you.		
7. The co-parent took the children boating without life jackets.		
8. The co-parent has changed pediatricians.		
9. The co-parent is going on a vacation without the children.		
10. The co-parent has someone spending the night when the children are in the home.		
11. The co-parent has arranged summer camp for the children.		

