

Playing the Game of Love

We talked to local marriage and family therapists to find out how they coach their clients through relationship struggles—especially those involving parenting—and what key strategies they give couples who feel like they’re on the brink.

BY MARY STONE



In every relationship,
there is conflict,
but in a parenting
relationship, the
conflict is complicated
by the enormity of the
task: raising children
and steering their
experience of the world.
Those early experiences
eventually will form the
basis of their future—
influencing the way
they see, hear, feel,
and react to it—forever!
What job could be
more important or
more daunting?

As parents, the models we formed as children are still in motion today in the way we relate to our co-parents, partners, or spouses. In that way, and nearly every other way, a parent's influence is deep and far-reaching, cycling through generations now and to come. But that doesn't necessarily make parenting more complex.

"So much of good parenting comes down to how parents treat each other: the model they're creating for their children growing up," says JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D., a Brighton-based clinical psychologist and author of "Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive through Divorce."

Pedro-Carroll says we tend to complicate parenting when, in large part, it boils down to showing children how as parents we can effectively and peacefully resolve conflict between each other.

"One of the two biggest predictors of how children will do after a separation is the extent to which parents can contain their conflict, keep their children out of the middle, and how they parent effectively." This is equally important in families where parents live together, she says.

But disagreeing well, in the heat of the moment, with kids screaming, the school bus waiting, the phone ringing, requires strength beyond our mortal grasp. We snap. Then we don't apologize; we forget to show appreciation; we avoid daily conflict while resentment accrues, and, over enough time, the unresolved conflict destroys the relationship. It seems simple yet endlessly complex at the same time.

Technology now gives us more methods than ever to communicate, but that has not made our communication better, Pedro-Carroll says.

"One of the characteristics of the most successful families is how communication happens between the adults and adults and children. So, communicating in ways that increase empathy, understanding that doesn't result in assumptions and these hasty impulses of firing of texts or tweets—things that can be pretty destructive," Pedro-Carroll says.

Everything we do is based on relationships, and relationships are based on how we communicate, she explains.

"There is a lot of harsh communication going on in the world. If we can maintain (control) in our dealings but certainly in our personal relationships remembering that if we're going to give negative feedback, we should look for opportunities to comment on the person's strengths and positive qualities. Expressing gratitude, with what I call 'velcro' appreciations that stick, is like Miracle-Gro for healthy relationships. To be able to say in a family: 'When I came home from work and I saw the house was cleaned up, I was so pleased. I really appreciate your thoughtfulness.' It has the added benefit of making people want to be more giving."

The real hard part seems to come from changing old communication habits.

"In communicating as co-parents, we have this implicit: 'This is how we were raised,' or 'This is our experience,' so some parents are following that naturally because that was the model set for them, or they are trying not to follow an experience that for them was not so great. This isn't commonly, openly discussed. This is just part of how we behave, and so in the moment, when we find we're not on the same page, often there's no pre-discussion about that. It's just manifesting itself in front

of a kid in an audience," says Jessica Moore, Ph.D., a pediatric, family psychologist at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

In her work with patients, Moore tries to initiate conversations about how to handle conflict before it happens in the day-to-day of parenting. She calls it pre-communication, which involves outlining what parents have the most trouble with; the common themes of their disagreements. They answer the question: "How in the moment can you best give me feedback without making me mad or making me feel like I'm defensive about that feedback, or triggering the kid?" Moore says.

One common conflict theme Moore sees is discipline, which stems not only from family models growing up, but circumstances, resources, expectations, temperament, etc. Often, what is needed is education about what parents can legitimately expect from their children.

"Sometimes it could be that parents are arguing about how to discipline a child for an issue that keeps coming up. So both parents think the other's approach is ineffective, when the truth is that's just a developmentally inappropriate expectation (for a child that age)," Moore says.

Understanding those developmental limits and also the underpinnings of their children's unique personalities and fears helps Jaima Herberger, 38, and Daniel Herberger, 41, with daughter Ella, 9, and son Adelai, 7. The Rochester couple has been married for 12 years and together for 13 and a half.

"Ultimately, as parents, we're on the same page. Each kid is different, and as people we're both different, so our responses in the same situations are different," Jaima says.

"I try to take in the things that she suggests, it just doesn't always happen when she suggests them," Daniel says. "When the kids were young, it was about meeting their needs, clothing and feeding them," Daniel says. As they get older and become little people, it's responding to their emotions, frustration and anger, for example, parenting is different, he says. "In that regard Jaima tends to be ahead of the game in knowing how to deal with those things, so taking her suggestions is definitely helpful for me."

The couple's biggest parenting problem was understanding the extreme reactions their children had to certain situations, which to their parents' sensibilities seemed completely benign. By working with a therapist, Jaima and Daniel were able to see that although their children are very different, they both have similar fears—shame and embarrassment. To those feelings, Ella often would react by running off; Adelai would erupt or hide.

If their son, for example, fell and they asked if he was hurt, Adelai would become furious. Through therapy, the Herbergers began to un-

derstand that by talking about it, they were drawing attention to the fall. They then changed their reaction. "Now, instead of saying: 'Are you OK?' when he falls, I just make eye contact to see if he is OK, without drawing attention to him. That adjustment alone drastically changed the overall tension in our house," Jaima says.

Daniel and Jaima say they are fairly similar in their world view, in their ideas about discipline, their values, and lifestyle. In terms of temperament, however, Daniel says he tends to become frustrated faster than Jaima, but together they balance each other out. For them, understanding their children was what they sought and got from therapy, which they did early on as parents—when their oldest turned four and they began struggling with her temper.

For other couples, conflict and communication problems propel them to seek therapy, but often not as quickly as the Herbergers did. Studies show that for those couples that wait to get help, divorce is more common. Pedro-Carroll says studies have shown that the couples who most often got divorced waited an average of six years before seeking help. Unfortunately, the effects of that ongoing conflict on children can last for years.

Emotions are charged when people discuss their kids. "My aunt used to say this and I like to use it clinically," Moore says. "Your kids are



sort of like your heart walking outside of your body.’ The stakes are just higher. These are usually what matter most to people, and when that’s true there is more emotion involved. The rational part of the brain and the emotional part of the brain, while they do work together, are (located) in different parts of the brain. So, it makes even communication more difficult.”

Add to the mix that in parental relationships, both parents necessarily have different dispositions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, expectations, and convictions. We are different, and so it is natural that when it comes to raising children, parenting roles can collide with force. What we don’t know or forget is how dangerous—or helpful—that collision can be.

“There are some very good studies that show when children are exposed to unresolved, repeated conflict, it has an impact not only on their

In communicating as co-parents, we have this implicit: ‘This is how we were raised,’ or ‘This is our experience,’ so some parents are following that naturally because that was the model set for them, or they are trying not to follow an experience that for them was not so great. This isn’t commonly, openly discussed.

emotional health but their physical health. Children are three times more likely to be ill if they are exposed to repeated, unresolved conflict between parents, especially if the conflict involves the child,” says Pedro-Carroll. “There are some European studies that are very sobering, showing higher rates of cancer in children exposed to unresolved parental conflict.” She adds: “But I want to be very clear that that doesn’t mean parents have a fight and it was linked to a child getting cancer. It is really repeated, ongoing conflict unresolved over time.”

Besides cancer, there are no specific types of illness that are associated with ongoing conflict, but the mechanism by which these illnesses

can manifest is clear. “We know that stress increases cortisol; cortisol increases inflammation, and inflammation increases the likelihood of illness. So, it’s pretty important stuff, but it’s also so clear that there are ways to prevent that and to increase children and adults’ resilience if they’re going through a separation or just experiencing conflict as all families do.”

It depends on how the conflict is approached, she explains. If it’s done well, children get a front-row seat at watching how people can relate well and create stronger bonds not just in spite of conflict, but because of it.

“When children can see parents deal with unpleasant emotions: anger, conflict, and see them handle it in reasonable ways, it’s so beneficial rather than thinking there is never going to be any conflict. There is plenty of research to support that, too,” Pedro-Carroll says.

It strengthens children’s ability to deal with reality because conflict, Pedro-Carroll explains, is an inevitable aspect of any relationship: with a best friend, a partner, a child. It’s not whether we have it, but how creatively we can deal with it, she says.

“I think if we get into a consistent pattern of avoiding conflict, we are ignoring our own important feelings, and then, before you know it, we forget all the reasons why we are distant from that person, but they’re bottled up,” Pedro-Carroll says. “Maybe there were things that if they could have been addressed early on, they could have resulted in deeper understanding. When we can deal with conflict in an effective way and be able to talk about it and come up with solutions, we can feel a lot closer to the person.”

Beyond the parents’ relationship, good parenting, Pedro-Carroll says, boils down to love and limits. Love is about being warm, empathetic, and supportive but with clear expectations that are age appropriate, she says. As parents, how well people do in therapy depends on their openness to change and their threshold for tolerating it, Moore says. It also depends on how young their kids are when they start.

The bigger the kids, the bigger problem. Little kids, littler problems. “So if you are not on the same page as the other parent and you have a two-year-old, you’re going to have two-year-old temper tantrums that are maybe exhausting, but let’s say that you have this big limit-setting issue when you’re parenting or co-parenting, and it’s a teenager, and so now the teenager is going to take risks or hang out with the wrong crowd.” Their actions can more easily jeopardize their future. The older children get, the harder the problems are to control and solve.

In either situation, therapists say behavioral and communication habits in the family take several years to develop, and as a result take more than just a few weeks of therapy to undo.

But, why?

More questions for JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D., a family therapist, clinical psychologist and advisor to Sesame Street on its initiative, “Little Children, Big Challenges: Divorce”

By Mary Stone

Why is communication so difficult between parents (co-parents and parents in intact homes)? Also, can parenting in one home be just as difficult as co-parenting in separate homes?

Effective communication is vital to everything we do. Yet, wires can get crossed so easily, whether in a home where parents are together or separated. Adults bring to parenting experiences from their own families of origin, their values, old hurts. Their views about what makes a “good parent” may vary. These differences can be a strength when they balance each other and parents work together—or may become obstacles when underlying anger, conflict, blame, and resentment slip in. A big danger is the blame game—when parents get into a pattern of blaming or shaming. Nothing good comes from that, and it keeps them from being on the same page, or at least in the same chapter of their parenting book. The key is to remember that it is often more effective to be kind and respectful rather than frequently trying to prove you are right.

Therapists talk a lot about communication skills or tools. What are some examples? In my work developing parent education programs used throughout the

country, I emphasize the golden rule of communication: Taking phrases like “You never” and “You always” out of communication. This only incites anger and defensiveness that blocks effective communication. Instead, use of “I messages” goes a long way toward increasing understanding and clear communication. Here’s an example: A parent sees that the other parent is letting the child ride his bike without a helmet. Instead of “What is wrong with you? You always let him do whatever he wants!”, a more productive way to communicate is with an I statement: “I’m really concerned about Sam riding his bike without his helmet. I would appreciate it if you made sure he has it on before he leaves the house. It’s for his safety and protection.”

Another key skill is active listening. Too often we think we know what the other person is expressing, or we’re thinking about what we will say next to prove a point. Active listening involves taking time to genuinely listen to the other person and reflect back the message we hear so that the other parent has the chance to clarify or correct misunderstandings. In our quick texting culture, miscommunication happens so easily, especially when mes-

sages are fired off in the heat of anger. It’s always best to stop, think, and breathe before clicking “send.” My advice to parents is to remember the “BIFF” rule in texting or email. Keep messages brief, informative, friendly, and firm or clear.

What piece of advice do you think is most valuable for parents or co-parents to succeed? I love to work with adults in my therapy practice about the topic of stacking the deck for success in their communication. These skills contribute to healthy relationships between parents and their children—and lead to resilience and healthy adjustment for everyone. A win-win outcome!

When parents are able to relate as respected colleagues in the business of parenting, everyone wins. Even for separated parents, if they can begin to think of each other as respected colleagues in the business of raising their children, they can work toward healing their personal hurts and focus on their parenting.

Studies show that certain factors are related to successful co-parenting:

Flexibility: Willingness to adjust to schedule changes or events.

Empathy: Ability to understand the other parent’s point of view or feelings.

Judiciousness: Using good judgment and avoid pulling children into their conflicts or adult issues.

Fair-mindedness: They don’t stay stuck in anger and blame.

Respectfulness: Communicate effectively and maintain an attitude of mutual respect.

Child-oriented focus: Keep children’s best interests a top priority.

Please note, however, that

this approach is not recommended in situations of domestic violence or abuse.

What are some of the most common sources of conflict between parents? Does it stem most often from the differences in their backgrounds, their family models, or does it have more to do with people temperaments and personalities? Yes, a parent’s own temperament, family background, and mental health all contribute to approaches to parenting.

A frequent source of conflict is when there is a big difference in parenting styles, for example, if one parent is very permissive and the other is very strict and rigid. There are so many potential sources of conflict. The good news is there are tried-and-true ways of dealing with them. This is critical for children’s health. Volumes of research tell us that ongoing conflict between parents is toxic to children’s physical and emotional health. When conflict continues unresolved and unabated between parents, it affects everyone in the family. Parents are less able to parent effectively; children’s behavior is affected, and relationships are strained, especially when children are caught in the middle of parent conflict. The best part of my work with families for over 30 years is witnessing what is possible when parents are committed to doing what is best for their children and take care of their own emotional needs. Empathy, effective communication, a collaborative problem-solving approach to resolving conflict, and being mindful of children’s needs contribute to healing, forgiveness, and successful outcomes for families of all forms.