

For Divorced Parents, a Time to Work Together

The pandemic's challenges and anxieties are helping some ex-spouses overcome old tensions for their children's sake.

By Peggy Drexler

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Robert and his ex-wife have been divorced for 13 years, during which time they have largely parented their 15-year-old son in a parallel fashion. They communicate exclusively by email and only about the most important matters—medical appointments, notices from school. The rest remains undiscussed. “I’ve tried for ages to encourage more active joint decision-making,” says Robert, a graphic designer near Boston. (To protect their privacy, he and other parents interviewed here asked not to use their last names.) “But she has always felt that our son is doing just fine if she parents her way and I parent my way.”

Until Covid-19, that is. In early March, Robert’s ex initiated a phone call—for the first time since their separation, he says—to come to an agreement about how they wanted to handle their individual households, rules for their son concerning schoolwork and friend interaction, and what would happen if one or both of them got sick. They now check in every other day to report how their son seems to be doing and to share their own concerns and fears. They have talked more in the last month than they have in the last decade—and argued not at all. His ex, in fact, now regularly sends their son to Robert’s house with bottles of hand sanitizer and homemade cookies; Robert’s second wife custom-sewed his ex a face mask. “It is not only the most civil we’ve ever been as a blended family,” says Robert, “but it’s actually something close to pleasant.”

Even as social distancing under Covid-19 has physically separated friends and family, there’s evidence that, on an emotional level, the virus may actually bring some people together—the bitterest of exes included. “Co-parenting is hard under the best of circumstances, so you might think it would get even harder during a time of great stress and fear, like this one,” says Manhattan psychologist and single mother of two Dr. Sarah Gundle. “But disaster can bring about a lot of real prosocial behaviors. People who are normally against each other suddenly come together in a way that feels natural.”

This was Dr. Gundle’s experience working with recovery efforts in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. “After Katrina, the city was complete and utter chaos, a mess,” she recalls. “But there was also a new solidarity. It was remarkable how people extended past themselves even among this complete landslide of loss.” Now she points to several instances of “practical acts of kindness” she’s seen during Covid-19, “not just among strangers and patients

of mine, but also within my own life,” noting that even though the father of her teenage daughter hadn’t set foot in her apartment in 10 years, he recently drove two hours to spend time with them both in quarantine. “And that kindness,” she says, “is distilling into co-parenting.”

Lauren, a 44-year-old writer and mother of one in Brooklyn, and her soon-to-be-ex-husband were in the middle of a divorce so contentious that they had to have a mutual friend facilitate their 5-year-old daughter’s household transitions. After the pandemic began to take over their lives, however, Lauren’s ex began to soften. Suddenly he was willing to compromise on issues like the sale of their apartment and the amount of child support he was willing to pay.

“I was also terrified I’d have to ask him to stop seeing his new girlfriend,” she says. “I was worried about contagion, but I was sure he’d think I was jealous, or say no just to spite me.” He surprised her by saying he had decided it was best to quarantine completely solo. As a result, says Lauren, “My divorce has been the least stressful part of an otherwise extremely stressful situation. I mean, we’re still getting divorced. We still don’t like each other very much right now. But he’s being kinder than he has in years, and I have too. It’s made me so much more hopeful for the future.”

Dr. Dori Gatter, a psychologist in Hartford, Conn., points out that shared experiences can build connection. “At a time when everyone’s more anxious about everything, co-parenting has gotten more relaxed because there are things more important than your personal conflict,” she says. People everywhere suddenly depend on each other in new ways. “Because of the inherent dangers we all face, the instinct is to come together,” she says. “For parents, the bond that may have once existed between them can be reignited—I’m not talking romantically—in the specific context of the shared interest, the child, they have. There’s a biological need to get along to survive.”

Typically, says Dr. Gatter, unresolved differences occur when one party doesn’t understand the other party’s position, or chooses not to. But during a crisis, empathy increases—even for your ex. “At a time like this, everyone’s just doing the best they can,” she says. “It becomes almost impossible not to understand where the other person’s coming from, even if you don’t agree with it. Which removes all of the blame and stops anyone from taking things personally. It’s not just so and so’s being a jerk because this or that. It’s a real understanding: They’re afraid, or they’re concerned, and I know this because I am too.”

Certain logistics of shared parenting during a crisis can also encourage better co-parenting behavior. Many divorced or separated parents are now handing off their children in person for the first time. “This requires people to put on their game face,” says Dr. Gundle. “Eventually, the game face becomes the norm.”

Cory, a 50-year-old father of two boys in Portland, Maine, has always thought his ex-wife was “a pretty lazy parent,” he says. “But so many things right now just aren’t worth fighting over. I trust that she would never put our boys in danger, and that’s good enough right now, and the kids have never been easier to handle. Our biggest struggle during coronavirus has been how much videogames the boys should be playing a day!”

Robert hopes that the goodwill between him and his ex-wife will continue once life goes “back to normal.” “If we’d been able to parent like this all along,” he says, “I think things could have gone a lot more smoothly. Certainly, it would have been less stressful, for us as parents but likely for our son, too.”