

C hildren’s Bill of Rights

By Alex Glassmann, Esq.
*Couples, Family, and Divorce Attorney-Mediator
Founding Partner, Glassmann Family Coaching*

Each child has a right to a set of co-parents who:

i. Show respect to each other:

Child psychologists emphasize that children often identify with both of their parents, making them vulnerable to internalizing criticisms directed at either parent. This internalization can occur subconsciously and lead to emotional issues, even when children outwardly support the critical parent. Research indicates that such exposure to co-parent criticism can contribute to identity issues, lowered self-esteem, and long-term psychological challenges.

-Amato, P. R., & Afifi, T. D. (2006). Feeling Caught Between Parents: Adult Children’s Relations With Parents and Subjective Well-Being. Journal of Marriage and Family, 68(1), 222-235.

-Fainsilber Katz, L., & Gottman, J. M. (1991). Marital discord and child outcomes: A social psychophysiological approach. In R. A. Hinde & J. Stevenson-Hinde (Eds.), Relationships within families: Mutual influences (pp. 104-125). Oxford University Press.

Note:

What psychologists recommend is a standard which is more strict than most people are accustomed to. For example, in various cultures, it is permissible for people to politely criticize each other, especially if there is objective truth to the

criticism, etc. But in the context of divorce, child psychologists argue that co-parents should self-censor even nobly motivated, objectively true critiques of each other whilst in front of the children. As mediator Steve Erickson used to say, "Bite your tongue until it bleeds if you have to."

Because this standard feels unnaturally strict for most people, it winds up that even earnest, well-intentioned co-parents commonly err. For example, it is difficult to self-censor in the heat of the moment, even one’s children are present. The good news? Research demonstrates that when parents lose their temper and criticize each other in front of their children, it is effective to follow up with the children and offer an unequivocal apology. This practice significantly mitigates the chances of children internalizing the criticism, thereby protecting their emotional well-being. Apologizing helps reassure children, showing them that conflicts can be resolved and that their parents’ relationship with each other is distinct from their relationship with the child. While it may feel unfair to apologize for a justified criticism, child psychologists emphasize that the priority should be the children’s psychological health rather than the validity of the criticism.

-Gottman, J. M., & Katz, L. F. (1989). Effects of Marital Discord on Young Children’s Peer Interaction and Health. Developmental Psychology, 25(3), 373-381.

-Faber, A., & Mazlish, E. (2012). How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk. Scribner.

ii. Outwardly support each other:

Child psychologists consistently report that children benefit greatly when they hear positive remarks about one parent from the other. This practice helps bolster the child’s emotional security and contributes to a healthier psychological state. Moreover, positively encouraging children in their relationship with the other parent reinforces their sense of being loved and valued by both parents, which is essential for their emotional development.

-Kelly, J. B., & Emery, R. E. (2003). *Children’s Adjustment Following Divorce: Risk and Resilience Perspectives*. *Family Relations*, 52(4), 352-362.

-Sandler, I. N., Miles, J. C., Cookston, J. T., & Braver, S. L. (2008). *Effects of father and mother parenting on children’s mental health in high- and low-conflict divorces*. *Family Court Review*, 46(2), 282-296.

Note:

Research indicates that for positive statements about one parent to be effective, the parent making the statements does not need to feel genuinely positive. Children are sensitive to the emotional climate between their parents, and even if they sense that a compliment is not entirely genuine, the effort alone can make a significant difference in their emotional well-being. Rather than waiting for an internal motivation for an “organic” compliment, consistently offering respectful and positive remarks, even if they are brief or routine, helps maintain a child’s sense of stability and security.

-Hetherington, E. M., Stanley-Hagan, M., & Anderson, E. R. (1989). *Marital Transitions: A Child’s Perspective*. *American Psychologist*, 44(2), 303-312.

-Emery, R. E. (1994). *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Child Custody, and Mediation*. Guilford Press.

iii. Show respect & support extended family & family friends:

Research supports the idea that children benefit from maintaining ties with grandparents, relatives, and other significant figures in their lives. These relationships offer additional emotional support, provide stability, and contribute to the child’s sense of identity, all of which are particularly beneficial during times of family change, such as after a divorce.

-Dunn, J., & Deater-Deckard, K. (2001). *Children’s Views of Their Changing Families*. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 35(3-4), 1-16.

-Silverstein, M., & Ruiz, S. (2006). *Breaking the Chain: Grandparent Bonding to Divorced Parents and the Well-Being of Grandchildren*. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(12), 1686-1707.

iv. Help friends and relatives to show respect to the other parent:

It is crucial for co-parents to encourage their friends and relatives to refrain from making negative or disrespectful comments about the other parent in any context where the children might overhear. Research shows that children exposed to such comments are at risk of developing anxiety, confusion, and loyalty conflicts, which can result in emotional distress.

-Grych, J. H., & Fincham, F. D. (1990). *Marital conflict and children’s adjustment: A cognitive-contextual framework*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(2), 267-290.

-Johnston, J. R., & Roseby, V. (1997). *In the Name of the Child: A Developmental Approach to Understanding and Helping Children of Conflicted and Violent Divorce*. Free Press.

v. Prevent loyalty binds:

Now, there is a painfully obvious way in which a co-parent could create a damaging loyalty bind—by putting the children in the middle of an argument. For example, "Who's right, mom or dad?!"

But there is a more subtle form that tends to catch parents off-guard: Well-meaning questions like, “Who would you like to spend the weekend with?” nonetheless force children to make choices between parents, and this can place undue emotional pressure on them. It can lead to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and divided loyalties, which can negatively impact their mental health and emotional well-being.

As well-intended all of those kinds of questions are, child psychologists strongly recommend that co-parents avoid putting children in positions where

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they must choose between parents, even in subtle ways.

-Wallerstein, J. S., & Kelly, J. B. (1980). *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*. Basic Books.

-Johnston, J. R., & Campbell, L. E. G. (1988). *Impasses of Divorce: The Dynamics and Resolution of Family Conflict*. Free Press.

Note:

To avoid loyalty binds, it is effective for co-parents to confer privately ahead of any decisions regarding time-sharing, such as where the children should stay on a particular weekend or how to divide a holiday break. Research supports this practice as it helps reduce the emotional burden on children, who might otherwise feel pressured to choose between their parents. Therefore, co-parents should aim to privately coordinate and maintain as close to an equitable time-sharing arrangement as possible.

This is as true for 35 year olds as it is for 3-year-olds. In other words, even grown children can experience loyalty conflicts if their parents do not coordinate on significant family events.

-Ahrns, C. R. (2007). *Family Ties After Divorce: Long-Term Implications for Children*. *Family Process*, 46(1), 53-65.

-Luecken, L. J., & Fabricius, W. V. (2003). *Physical Health Vulnerabilities in Adult Children from Divorced and Intact Families*. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 55(3), 221-228.

vi. Prevent parental alienation:

There are essentially two varieties of parental alienation, the old-school variety and the new-school.

The old-school, traditional, overt form of parental alienation occurs when one or both co-parents make a purposeful effort to disparage the other parent in front of the children, blame the other parent for various issues, or encourage the children to cut ties with the other parent. This behavior can

have severe long-term psychological effects on children, including difficulties with attachment, trust, and mental health.

In some cases, children who resist visiting the other parent may require the favored parent to help provide consistent follow-through, reinforcing the agreed-upon schedule. In more severe cases, where estrangement has occurred, family therapy may be necessary. Effective family therapy often involves individual sessions with each family member, followed by group sessions to rebuild relationships.

-Warshak, R. A. (2001). *Current Controversies Regarding Parental Alienation Syndrome*. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 19(3), 29-59.

-Baker, A. J. L., & Ben-Ami, N. (2011). *To Turn a Child Against a Parent Is to Turn a Child Against Himself: The Impact of Parental Alienation*. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 33(3), 250-278.

The subtle, “new-school” variety of parental alienation can occur even when co-parents have noble intentions. An emotionally aware parent who is honest and articulate about their feelings regarding the divorce might not harbor any resentment against the other parent and may genuinely want their children to maintain a healthy relationship with both parents. However, by expressing their own pain or difficulties, they may inadvertently evoke sympathy from the children, leading them to align with one parent and alienate the other. This form of alienation, though less overt, can be just as harmful, resulting in emotional distress and damaged relationships. Addressing this issue often requires family therapy or specialized retreats for co-parents who wish to avoid unintentional alienation and support their children’s relationships with both parents.

-Johnston, J. R., Walters, M. G., & Olesen, N. W. (2005). *The Psychological Functioning of Alienated Children in Custody Disputes: An Exploratory Study*. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 23(3), 39-64.

-Kelly, J. B., & Johnston, J. R. (2001). *The Alienated Child: A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome*. *Family Court Review*, 39(3), 249-266.

vii. Do not use the kids as messengers or for delivering items:

In my experience, nearly all parents have used their children as messengers. So, if parents so commonly do this, why is it considered a fundamental right for children *not* to be treated this way?

One reason is that it risks creating communication breakdowns, as children may misinterpret or forget parts of the message. Even when parents do a good job of explaining, "Hey, it's not your fault," or "It's not a big deal," kids are often incapable of effectively forgiving themselves.

Another reason psychologists caution against this is because it can involve children in adult conflicts, which introduces undue stress and anxiety.

In the end, direct communication between parents is essential to prevent children from becoming emotionally burdened and to maintain clear and effective communication.

-Emery, R. E. (1999). *Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
-Hetherington, E. M., & Kelly, J. (2002). *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*. W.W. Norton & Company.

viii. Do not involve the children in discussions pertaining to parenting topics:

It may seem obvious to say that it can be psychologically damaging for children to bear witness to any arguments or disagreements. However, it may surprise you to know that it can be just as damaging for children to witness friendly parenting discussions, too.

Research indicates that involving children in parenting discussions, even when these

discussions are amicable, can lead to confusion, stress, and a sense of responsibility for the outcomes. Though it may sometimes feel unnaturally strict, it is essential for parents to handle these matters privately to maintain their child’s sense of security and stability.

-Hetherington, E. M., & Stanley-Hagan, M. (1999). *The Adjustment of Children with Divorced Parents: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective*. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40(1), 129-140.
-Buchanan, C. M., Maccoby, E. E., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). *Caught Between Parents: Adolescents' Experience in Divorced Homes*. *Developmental Psychology*, 27(6), 1003-1010.

ix. Refrain from discussing personal topics:

This is what I call the "Gilmore Girls" provision. This show featured a mom who wanted to be good friends with her daughter, but in trying to be close, she grossly overshared. It made for interesting, dramatic television, but it makes for poor parenting.

Parents should be cautious about sharing any personal details, particularly regarding romantic relationships, with their children. Research shows that when parents blur the lines between parent and peer, it can lead to role confusion, emotional burden, and difficulties with boundaries in the child’s own relationships later in life. Maintaining clear boundaries is essential for providing the emotional stability children need.

-Pruett, K. D. (2000). *Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*. Free Press.
-Minuchin, S., & Fishman, H. C. (1981). *Family Therapy Techniques*. Harvard University Press.

x. Solve problems early:

“Solve problems early” sounds simple, but sadly, the most constant refrain I hear from therapists is, "Wow, you want me to fix that?! That's going to take years!" It's easy to rationalize that a problem

might go away on its own. Or, in the midst of life’s overwhelm, time flies by.

That’s why it’s important to be reminded that addressing conflicts and issues early is essential to prevent them from escalating into more significant problems that are harder to resolve later. Psychological research strongly supports early intervention as a means to maintain emotional health and reduce the long-term impact (and cost) of conflicts.

-Emery, R. E. (2011). *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Child Custody, and Mediation*. Guilford Press.

-Amato, P. R. (2000). *The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children*. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1269-1287.

xi. Establish and respect each other's boundaries:

Boundaries can be hard for both sides, that is, for both the one requesting a boundary and the one on the receiving end.

Requesting a boundary can feel daunting because it involves a risk of conflict or discomfort. It’s natural to worry about unnecessarily “rocking the boat” or making a request that might seem trivial or selfish. However, research emphasizes that setting clear, reasonable boundaries is essential for maintaining healthy co-parenting relationships. Once you’ve determined that a boundary is necessary, it’s important not to self-censor. Addressing the issue directly helps prevent misunderstandings and resentment from building up, ensuring that both parents can manage their interactions effectively and in the best interest of their children.

-Lamia, M. C. (2011). *The White Knight Syndrome: Rescuing Yourself from Your Need to Rescue Others*. Jossey-Bass.

-Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (1992). *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*. Zondervan.

Note:

On the receiver’s end, it can be challenging to hear a request for a new boundary without feeling indignant or defensive, as it’s easy to interpret such a request as a personal criticism. While motivations behind the request may vary, boundary-setters often come from a place of reason, sometimes with guidance from a mediator or therapist. It’s important to anticipate feelings of indignation and not let them dictate the response. Taking a moment to calm down and evaluate the request rationally can lead to a more balanced and constructive outcome. For the requester, it’s usually best to focus on the specific action being asked for, rather than the underlying motivations, especially if they involve criticism. As the receiver, consider whether the request is manageable, even if it initially feels insulting. Maintaining a good faith approach and reciprocity in boundary-setting will benefit both parties over time.

-Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. Penguin Books.

-Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (1981). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Penguin Books.

xii. Adhere to an agreed-upon process regarding introducing significant others:

Introducing new romantic partners to children is a sensitive issue, and psychologists generally recommend caution to protect children’s emotional well-being. Research suggests that children need time to adjust to parental separation before being introduced to new partners, and rushing this process can lead to confusion, attachment issues, and emotional distress.

Psychologists recommend a cautious approach when introducing new significant others to children, typically suggesting that parents date for at least a year before making introductions. Now, measuring a year can be tricky sometimes; after all, sometimes people have known each other platonically for a long time and are only recently transitioning into a

romantic relationship. But what we can clearly take from the psychologists' recommendation is that you should be in a fully committed relationship, to the point where you would say “this is permanent.” If it's weaker than that, however excited you are to introduce that person to your kids, you probably shouldn't.

-Ahrns, C. R. (2004). *We're Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say About Their Parents' Divorce*. HarperCollins.

-Ganong, L. H., Coleman, M., Fine, M. A., & Martin, P. (1999). *Stepparents' Affinity-Seeking and Affection With Stepchildren*. *Journal of Family Issues*, 20(3), 299-327.

Note:

When you are ready to introduce a new significant other to your children, it is courteous (and obligatory) to give the other parent a heads-up. This is not about asking for permission but rather about ensuring open communication and preventing the other parent from finding out through the children. By informing the other parent, both can discuss the introduction and ensure they present a united and harmonious approach to the children. This coordinated effort helps the children understand and adjust to the new relationship more smoothly and reduces potential confusion and anxiety. Additionally, giving the other parent a heads-up fosters mutual respect and can improve the overall co-parenting dynamic, benefiting the children's emotional well-being.

-Emery, R. E. (2004). *The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive*. Viking.

-Fabricius, W. V., & Luecken, L. J. (2007). *Postdivorce Living Arrangements, Parent Conflict, and Long-Term Physical Health Correlates for Children of Divorce*. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21(2), 195-205.