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### Getting along with your ex: Children are hurt when divorced parents duel


By **ANN WEBER**  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Ask Robert Neeley for his ex-wife's daytime phone number at work, and he can give it to you from memory, without hesitation.

Same for her evening phone number.

That's because he and Tracie Neeley communicate regularly — and amicably — about their daughter, Taylor, 10.



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Divorced for about four years, they attend parent-teacher conferences together, coordinate house rules on discipline, bedtimes, and homework, trade responsibility for sick days, arrange Taylor's visits with each parent based on work schedules and common sense rather than the dictates of a court order, and sit with each other at Taylor's soccer and softball games.

"I'm still the dad and she's mom. What does it hurt to be decent to this person?" asks Mr. Neeley of Oregon. "To go on and be angry and hateful, what does that accomplish?"

Whether the Neeleys are the norm or the exception Dennis Kogut cannot say. But the clinical psychologist and director of Central Behavioral Healthcare sees the poisonous opposite among the divorced and divorcing parents who attend the center's CoPE (CoParenting Effectively) program.

Developed in collaboration with Lucas County Domestic Relations Court, CoPE aims to help parents refocus their attention on doing what's good

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their children.”

In fact, he points out, “the biggest predictor of adjustment for kids [to their parents’ divorce] is the degree of conflict between the parents.”

As Denise Logan puts it, “the kids get trapped in the middle a lot.” In the highest-conflict divorce cases — such as those that end up in the CoPE program — that animosity may continue for years, says the administrator of the domestic relations court’s counseling department.

In some extreme cases, parents can’t even be civil long enough to pass the kids back and forth for visits. For them, the Children’s Resource Center of Northwest Ohio operates three sites called “The Gift Exchange” (Faith Lutheran Church on South Avenue, Olivet Lutheran Church on Monroe Street, and Hope United Methodist Church on West Sylvania Avenue). One parent takes the children to the center, and 15 minutes later the other parent arrives to pick them up. “We don’t want them to see each other,” explains director Margaret Wuwert, who says the CRC also conducts supervised visits and mediation.

She estimates that about 80 families use the programs at any given time, and that the average involvement lasts for a year and a half.

The damage to a child caught between dueling parents can include low self-esteem and impaired ability to trust, Ms. Logan says.

Some kids will play their parents against each other, some may become alienated from mom or dad, she continues. Some children might have to be constantly on guard about what they say to their parents — they can’t tell dad about having fun at mom’s house because dad will get mad; they’re not allowed to go over and say hello to dad at a softball game because it’s mom’s week. Parents have been known to get into shouting matches — even fist fights — in public, with the child present.

“Obviously, it’s very detrimental or embarrassing to the child,” Ms. Logan says.

Just about everyone going through a divorce struggles with their emotions, and says or does something that they later regret, she acknowledges. “It’s just part of being human and going through a difficult time,” she says, adding that most people are able to move past that.

There’s healing over time, but “it’s like a scar... It never goes away,” says Sally Bullimore of Perrysburg, who has been re-married for 15 years but still has contact with her ex-husband through their adult children. In her view, “People need to know it’s OK if it still bothers you,” she says. Her advice: “You do what you have to do” for the welfare of your children, then vent afterward with close friends who will understand.

“Kids learn by what they hear, and you’re going to have hateful, spiteful children if that’s what they’ve lived,” asserts Dawn Cambal of Blissfield, a divorced mother of 12-year-old twin girls. She credits a Lenawee County court program for helping her and her ex-husband, Steve Cambal of Jasper, Mich., establish a good working relationship after their split.

“From the beginning, if it had to do with the kids, we never had a problem,” Ms.

for their children rather than on punishing each other.

CoPE is in addition to the court’s Assisting Our Kids (A-OK) program that’s mandatory for all parents in Lucas County who are going through a divorce or dissolution.

“It is natural if someone feels hurt to want to hurt back,” Mr. Kogut says. “It is very hard for people to put that aside, and ask this question: I might get even, but what is that going to do to my child? They lose sight of the impact of what they’re doing on

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Cambal says. When the girls look up into the stands at a school or sporting event they see their parents sitting together. They know that if they're grounded at one house, they're going to be grounded at the other one, too.

"People would say, I envy your relationship, and I'd say, then do it. If you want that relationship with your ex, then do it," Ms. Cambal declares.

Robert Neeley and Tracie Neeley both say they've seen how ugliness between former spouses can affect children, and that they didn't want their daughter to be a victim of their divorce.

"It was hard enough for her in her little mind when we were getting divorced, and we just didn't want to add any more to that," says Ms. Neeley, who lives in Northwood. Their respectful treatment of one another "sets an example for her, I think, and makes her outlook more positive."



Madchen Radke, 17, and Gabby Radke, 14, seated, with Rob and Lori Radke and Suzanne and Mark Loomus.

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Their cooperation even extends to major homework projects that travel from house to house with Taylor. For one on Annie Oakley, Ms. Neeley and Taylor worked together on pictures and a timeline, while at dad's house Taylor worked with her stepmother, Karla, on the written report.

"Karla and Tracie get along really well," Mr. Neeley says. "People think it's really weird. But why not?"

Certainly the Archibeque family wouldn't think there's anything strange about it. When Amanda Archibeque, now 23, celebrated her 21st birthday, and later had a party to celebrate her college graduation, she was surrounded by her dad, Jerry; his wife, Sherry; her mom, Valorie; and all their respective relatives.

"Even after we split up I went to Christmases at their house," says Mr. Archibeque, of Delta. "And when I got married, my wife went to a couple of Christmases with Val's family."

"We all get along," says Valorie, who lives in Maumee. She says when Amanda was little, she'd invite Amanda's stepsisters — Jerry and Sherry's three girls — to spend weekends with them at her house.

It was difficult to deal with each other in the beginning, Mr. Archibeque admits. "There were days where you just wanted to scream, and I'm sure she felt the same way. ... It wasn't my idea to get a divorce, so did I feel bad about that? Sure. Did I set it all aside? Yeah, because I knew it was tough enough for her (Amanda) to be without one or the other" parent.

Amanda was just 2½ when her parents divorced. "I think they did a great job raising me," says Miss Archibeque. "They always have the best interests of me in mind, regardless of what that might entail for them."

That's the way it should be, agrees Suzanne Loomus, who is divorced from Robert Radke and now married to Mark Loomus. Mr. Radke also is remarried, to Lori Radke. Both couples live in Sylvania.

Suzanne and Robert have two teenage daughters, Madchen and Gabrielle Radke.

"He and I sat down many times and talked about how important these kids are to us, and how we have to above anything else make sure they're OK," Mrs. Loomus says.

Their new partners contribute to having a smooth relationship. Everyone gets together at Christmas, for example, and they sit together at swim meets, volleyball games, choir concerts, and other functions, Mrs. Loomus says.

She says their daughters "acknowledge that other [divorced] parents don't do

this, and how lucky they are that we can all sit in the room together and actually enjoy each other.”

Elizabeth “Pinky” Edens goes so far as to call her former husband, Sal Barone of Defiance, and her current husband, Hal Edens, “best buddies.”

“My husband met my former husband through family gatherings while we were dating,” Mrs. Edens says.

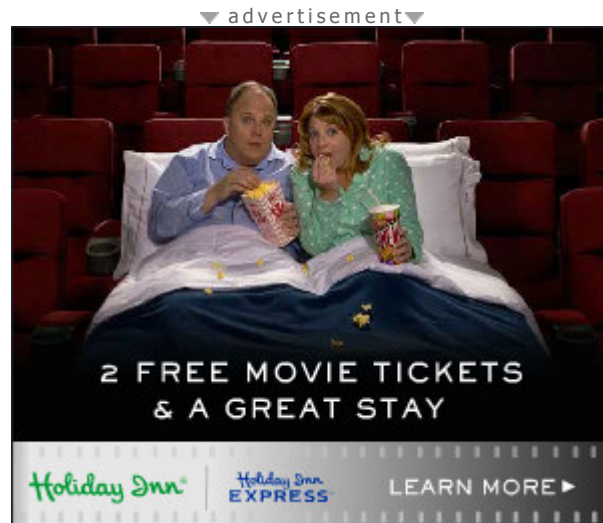
Yes, her ex continued to be invited to her family’s parties even after their divorce. And why not? “Everyone in my family loves him,” she explains.

The two men “simply accepted each other in the beginning, like a cousin or an uncle,” Mrs. Edens says. Over time, they became friends..

“We all go out to dinner together,” she goes on, “my former husband and his girlfriend and my husband and I. Sometimes we go on trips together to visit the kids. Sometimes Baron and I go alone,” Mrs. Edens says, using her nickname for Mr. Barone.

It’s great for the kids,” she observes, “because it shows the kids actually what love is about.”

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