



## THE FIVE CATEGORIES OF CO-PARENTING

### *Co-parenting Works! Helping Your Children Thrive After Divorce*

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In the Binuclear Family Study (BFS), a national study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and the University of Wisconsin Graduate School to explore how families change after divorce, Dr. Constance Ahrons concluded that five categories of co-parenting relationships exist.<sup>1</sup> Why is that important to you? Because understanding what category you and your co-parent are currently in, you can better strategize where you are going next, and how to get there. In Dr. Ahrons' book, *The Good Divorce*, she describes these five categories. Each of the descriptions below is condensed from the more complete description in *The Good Divorce*:

1. **Perfect Pals** (high interactors—high communicators). Perfect pals still call themselves good friends, even after divorce. Perfect pals stayed well connected, asking about each other's lives, activities, and feelings. They even asked for advice and helped each other out, as friends would. One couple in the study even continued to own a business together after the divorce. Perfect pals stayed connected with each other's extended families. All perfect pals had joint custody; some even spent many holidays together. A common pattern was that these couples followed this type of relationship early after the divorce, but grew more distant, though still friendly, as time passed.
2. **Cooperative Colleagues** (moderate interactors—high communicators). More of the couples in the study fell into this group than any other. Unlike perfect pals, cooperative colleagues did not consider themselves to be friends. Holidays were split according to a mutual agreement—not spent together. Cooperative colleagues talk often, always about the children or possibly extended family, not about their personal lives or feelings. In some cases, the dads had full custody, with the mother having visitation. Cooperative colleagues seem to have the ability to compartmentalize their relationship: They didn't confuse the issues connected to their marital relationship and those related to their parenting relationship. Their desire to provide the very best for their children trumped their own personal issues. Five years after divorce, 75 percent of these couples remained cooperative colleagues, even though most had remarried by that point.
3. **Angry Associates** (moderate interactors—low communicators). Twenty-five percent of the sample were angry associates. Instead of being able to compartmentalize their anger about the past, they let it spread into related and even non-related issues. With each other they were generally tense and hostile, or even openly conflictual. Most of the custody arrangements were for sole custody. Even five years after divorce most couples were dissatisfied with how things were going. By that time, one-third had transitioned into cooperative colleagues, one-third to fiery foes, and one-third remained angry associates.
4. **Fiery Foes** (low interactors—low communicators). Twenty-five percent of the sample were fiery foes—ex-spouses who rarely interacted. When they did talk, they usually ended up fighting. Their divorces tended to be highly litigious, and their legal battles often continued for many years after the divorce. They were not able to work out arrangements for the children without arguing, and many relied on third parties (lawyer, friend, or child) to settle their disagreements over each issue as it arose. Fiery foes were unable to remember the good times in their marriage; instead, they clung to the wrongs done to each other and even exaggerated them in order

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<sup>1</sup> Ahrons, C. (1994). *The Good Divorce*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher.

to keep building their case. Many of these ex-spouses exchanged their children at the door without saying a word.

5. **Dissolved Duos** (non-interactors—non-communicators). The study had no dissolved duos, since participants were required to be involved in their children's lives. In this category, ex-spouses are usually completely disconnected. The noncustodial parent is usually uninvolved and out of the picture, perhaps out of the geographical area. This creates true single-parent families; the other parent exists only in memories and fantasies.

**Which category do you find yourself in?** Which do you *wish* you were in? Let's make a record of it.

Please date it and write it down here: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

In which category do you think your co-parent would place the two of you today?

Date it and write it down here: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Which category do you think is best for your kids? \_\_\_\_\_

If the category you identified as best for your kids is not the one you think best describes the current place you and your ex occupy, how much effort are you willing to expend to move your "best parenting practices" with your ex to the level you identified in the final question above?

<b><u>Category</u></b>	<b><u>What Children Experience</u></b>
Perfect Pals	CONFUSION
Cooperative Colleagues	FREEDOM
Angry Associates	FEAR
Fiery Foes	STRESS
Dissolved Duos	PARENTIFICATION

Experts agree that Cooperative Colleagues is the most healthy co-parenting style for children—and also for ex spouses. Some might have thought, at first read, that Perfect Pals seems ideal; but a Perfect Pals relationship between exes is confusing to the children—and, frankly, it's also emotionally confusing to the ex spouses. If you and your former spouse have divorced, then your emotional needs should be met elsewhere, and your family traditions should be adjusted to your new lives. This is one of the hardest parts of starting new family legacies. We'll come back to this subject in another chapter, but for now, just remember that your children will be confused after divorce if everything else seems "the same" but you live in two different houses. It might be easier for the parents at first, but not for the kids. Your kids will be hoping, openly or secretly, for everyone to get back together under *one* roof again, and if Mom and Dad seem to still love each other just as much as they used to, well ... why not? And imagine the confusion for everyone when one of the two of you begins to date someone new. Are you going to bring your ex spouse along on the date, too? I doubt it.

The key to successfully developing a Cooperative Colleagues relationship is for both co-parents to "compartmentalize" the relationship—to understand your reasons for working cooperatively. It isn't so that the two of you can help meet each other's emotional needs. It isn't to give the two of you a chance to share the intimate personal details of your new lives. Your reason for cooperating is to co-parent your children forward into the most healthy and well-adjusted adults possible. To do so, you'll need to discuss schedules and financial matters. You'll need to have searching and thoughtful discussions of discipline and boundaries for each stage of life your children pass through, from potty training ideas to when they get their first cell phone or set of car keys. Co-parenting is real life, lived out in two homes by two caring co-parents who are committed to playing the game on the same TEAMM. The end adult matters most.

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