



W1. Supporting Children Through Co-Parenting Strategies

Wednesday, June 5, 2019
11:30 a.m. - 12:45 p.m.

Moderator:

- Toya Joyner, Family Assistance Program Specialist, Office of Family Assistance, Washington, D.C.

Presenters:

- Dr. Alicia La Hoz, Founder and CEO, Family Bridges, Wheaton, Illinois
- Dr. Carla Stover, Associate Professor, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut

Toya Joyner: Good morning. My name is Toya Joyner. I am a Family Assistance Program Specialist with the Office of Family Assistance. This session is Supporting Children Through Co-Parenting Strategies. Our presenters today are Dr. Alicia E. La Hoz, Founder and CEO of Family Bridges in Wheaton, Illinois and Dr. Carla Stover, Associate Professor at Yale University at the Child Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut.

Dr. Alicia La Hoz is a licensed clinical psychologist who for 20 years has brought psychological and social science research-based principles to leadership, professional development, wellness, and family life. Dr. La Hoz initially founded Family Bridges as a program of Meier clinics. Since 2016, Family Bridges has grown to an international nonprofit organization focused on family strengthening, and professional development.

Dr. Carla Stover is a licensed clinical psychologist and Associate Professor at Yale University School of Medicine Child Study Center. Her research interests are focused on the impact of violence and trauma, particularly family violence, on child development and the advancement of best practice interventions for children and families affected by such violence exposure. Dr. Stover has provided clinical services to families affected by domestic violence including acute crisis response and longer-term evidence-based treatments such as TF CVT and child-parent psychotherapy.

Dr. La Hoz: Thank you so much Toya. We're excited to be here. To get us going, I'm going to play a little bit of a podcast that we have with Family Bridges because we have Desmond Clark. I don't know if many of you are familiar with him, but he's a well-known football player, and he shares his struggle. I'm not going to play the whole thing. We're just going to play a couple minutes, but he actually grew up with a father that was not in the home, substance abuse, just difficult times, and he shares how his mother was able to engage in that process, and then how he





as a father learned even though he traveled a lot. He still stepped it up. I think it's a great story to get us in the tone of this co-parenting workshop, so we'll just listen in for a little bit.

Interviewer: Chicago Bears. Nonetheless, he founded a nonprofit called 88 Wayz Youth Organization in Chicago and Florida and is currently working on a new book. Ladies and gentlemen, once again, Desmond Clark. Thank you so much for joining us.

Desmond Clark: Glad to be here. Glad to join the conversation.

Interviewer 2: We're happy to have you both here. Desmond, you are a single parent, we're going to talk about that, but we also would like for our listeners to know a little bit more about you. Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Desmond Clark: I grew up in Lakeland, Florida, born and raised first 18 years of my life. My whole family is still basically there. After graduating from Kathleen High School was blessed enough to receive a scholarship to go to Wake Forest University and play football there. I had a pretty good college career, pretty good academic career, and was drafted by the Denver Broncos in 1999 in the sixth round and went through a transitional phase of not thinking I was ever going to make a team and 13 years later, after three years in Denver, one year Miami and nine years here in Chicago, I found myself retiring in 2011.

There's been a lot of transition and transformation and things throughout those years and times. Now I'm sure we'll get into some of those but me as a person, I'm a financial advisor now. That's my day job as I call it, but I got a lot of other things that I'm into. One being motivational speaking and helping out the youth.

Talked about my 88 Wayz Youth Organization, which is no longer in existence anymore, since I became a full time financial professional, but I'm still staying active in the community through NFL alumni. I've been the president of the Chicago chapter connecting to a lot of children first organizations, so I keep myself out in the community through NFL alumni. In nutshell, that's what I'm doing. That's who I am. Yes, damn busy.

Interviewer 2: Wow, that's a lot. You've been doing quite a lot, and you're also a parent.

Desmond Clark: I am a parent. Yes, I have four wonderful kids. I'm starting with my oldest who is up in North Dakota State now. He's a freshman there, also a walk-on football player. Then I have three young ones, 14-year-old twin girls, and then I have my little runt, he's five, and his job is just to annoy everybody else and then come run to me for cover, so he does a good job of doing that.





Interviewer 2: That's awesome.

Interviewer: I'm just wondering, your boy in college is he playing tight end as well?

Desmond Clark: No, he's a receiver.

Interviewer: He's a receiver.

Desmond Clark: He's not quite as ...

Interviewer: A little bit faster than daddy.

Desmond Clark: A little bit faster, a little bit smaller, and probably actually used to be a little bit stronger. I don't know if he kept that up, but when we used to work out together, he started pushing quite a bit of weight.

Interviewer: Good stuff. Thank you for sharing that with us. When it comes to parenting, single parents have a couple of things to consider. We're going to go ahead and dive into when I get older and I do have ...

Dr. La Hoz: I'm going to skip a little bit. I just wanted to give you a context of his story and his background. When he recorded this, he was actually going through a divorce, and what he shares is how in spite of the circumstances, how he was able to still be engaged in his family's life. I'm going to try to jump forward and just have you listen in a little bit and then we'll get started.

Desmond Clark: I have a child. He set up the scenario for me to just like, not want to be like him as far as a fatherly figure. I wanted to be the best dad. I wanted to be super communicating with my daughter and just be the person that my father was not with me. I guess, my father being the way that he was, developed me into the dad that I am today, you learn from his mistakes.

Interviewer 2: What a beautiful testimony that you both have that you can say, because I lived and experienced this, it doesn't mean that I need to live that experience.

Desmond Clark: Exactly.

Interviewer 2: I have a new chapter in my life, turn the page and learn from it and move forward. Thank you for sharing that, guys. Thank you. Well, we've talked about things to consider when dating and also about father involvement, so why don't we-





Dr La Hoz: Okay, so this is an example and I only gave you a little taste of it and a little glimpse of how we can engage fathers using multi-media. I hope that you appreciate that, given the morning session of how important it is to be in the spaces where people are at, but here I only gave you a taste of it. We explored Desmond Clark's own story, someone that's well known in the community, that's well respected.

Because of time, I'm not going to play it all for you, but he traced the story of how he grew up with his father abandoning him, and then how later his mom intervened, continued to provide a positive role model, a positive message toward his dad. She didn't blame him or say negative things as would be expected. Later he pursued his father in a relationship, regardless of the different disappointments that perhaps he came across. He then decided, as he stepped forward as a father, to be engaged and to do everything within his power to participate. Even while he was in the midst of a difficult transition, divorce and separation. We know how difficult that is. He still made every effort to participate and to be actively engaged.

I just wanted to share that because there's many different types of fathers. We're going to get into that conversation. As participants, as providers, we can come alongside our parents as we help them in co-parenting. We can use different types of strategies in order to do that.

Today, what we're going to be doing is giving you a taste of [the topic]. We're going to define what co-parenting is, and what that looks like. We're going to give you some activities and dynamics to engage in that process. Then we're going to be able to dive in more specifically. What can we do as providers in terms of interventions, dynamics, and creative ways that we can reach our fathers in a co-parenting context. Then we're going to talk a little bit more about the research and what that means.

To start off, Carla's going to provide some definitions for us.

Dr. Stover: I do want to hand these out. First let's talk about co-parenting. What is co-parenting because you hear this word thrown around a lot and this is one definition by Jamie McHale that I think is a particularly good one. Dr. McHale has some books about co-parenting, a lot of resources, and we're going to talk about the co-parenting consultation model that he has that I think is helpful for organizations to think about. "Co-parenting is an enterprise undertaken by one or more adults who together take on the care and upbringing of children with whom they share responsibility, so one or more adults." That doesn't necessarily mean a mom and a dad. Co-parenting can mean several adults, it can mean divorced parents, foster parents, grandparents, extended family members. This can be a dad who's been in residential treatment who's going to co-parent with his sister who's been raising his children while he's been in treatment. This can be grandma and son. This can be grandma and mom. This can be any combination of folks who have responsibility of the children.





I think oftentimes we forget about that. We forget about all the different co-parenting pairs that there may be. I know with the dads I work with, I'll hear things like, "I'm not co-parenting with her, I'm done with her," or mom saying, "I'm done with him. We're not doing it. There's no co-parenting going on here." I'm sorry to say you are co-parents for life. There is always a co-parenting relationship, whether we really want it or not, and it's to the benefit of the children for parents to try to figure out how to have the best possible co-parenting relationship you can.

I recognize that it's sometimes very complicated. It's not always simple and easy. Sometimes violence, sometimes incarceration, or sometimes substance use. There's a lot of things to consider in terms of the co-parenting relationship. We'll try to get to a little bit today, working with those more complicated cases, but we want to try to give you a framework of how do you try to help parents start to think about, you're co-parents, you're always going to be co-parents and who are your co-parenting partners?

Sometimes it's not just two, sometimes it's three, four, or five individuals coming together for the best interest of the children. How do you communicate? How do you solve problems to be consistent and provide an environment that's healthy for children?

We're going to start off with a little activity to get you thinking about a father, perhaps one that you've been working with.

Dr. La Hoz: We distributed little personas for you. We're going to have you break into groups of two or three. We'd like for you to first think of the fathers within your service agency. Who do you serve? Are you serving young millennials? Are you serving older couples? Are you serving like you said, incarcerated parents?

Who is the father within your agency? Choose one representative because obviously you're coming from different agencies, choose the type of father. What we'd like for you to do in this little persona, write who they are. What are their ages? What is their ethnicity? What is their demographic? What is their educational background? We have some fun questions like what would they purchase? Go ahead and take a few minutes. We'll give you about five minutes to work on this, and then we'll come back as we discuss our session today.

Dr. Stover: For time sake, we're going to have to wrap it up. I'm excited to see how much you are talking to each other and really appreciate the time you took to do that. Try to start to think about who are the dads you're working with, and how might co-parenting apply to those that you're working with? What individuals are you trying to target? Keep that person in mind as we're going through the rest of the presentation. I wish we had time to share and talk about all





the dads that you're thinking about or all the families that you're thinking about, but we are on a time clock, so we're going to keep things moving.

Let's think a little bit more about co-parenting and why it's important. I'm going to set the context a little bit, talk a bit about research. We're going to spend most of the time talking about practice and what do we do, but I think it's important to really understand what is it that we're talking about when we're thinking about fostering co-parenting.

To foster healthy emotional growth of very young children, co-parenting adults must collaborate to create a steadfast framework. They must have a framework of what their co-parenting is, what are things like in our house, in our family and in our relationships. What that means is, we have to have support and solidarity between whoever the co-parents are, mom-dad, dad-grandma. We have to support each other. We have to be a team. How can we be a team? Sometimes teams look different, but what is the best? How can we become a team in the best interest of our child? Which means consistency and predictability in the approaches that are taken. How do we approach development and parenting of our children and how can we be consistent and predictable so our children know what to expect, because that's when they do best.

What security and integrity are in the family's home? How secure is our house? In both houses, and how can we be consistent? How can both homes feel safe and secure? If one parent is bashing the other parent's home all the time, does that person's home feel safe and secure? Absolutely not.

Accurate attunement. How attuned are each parent, each caregiver to the child's fears, needs and wishes; and, a child's wish often is that they want to be loved and cared for by both parents. That's very important to have that attunement, which is really hard sometimes.

The other thing to think about in terms of a co-parenting focus is in terms of what are some of the outcomes, so co-parenting is more associated with outcomes than marital relationship satisfaction. We talk about marriage and divorce and should people stay together. What's most important is how do people communicate around co-parenting and the parenting of their children. That is more important in terms of outcomes, than how good your marriage and relationship is.

Co-parenting relationships are distinct from intimate relationships. I mentioned that I hear all the time, "I'm done with her, we're not doing any co-parenting." Those relationships are distinct. Sometimes we have families where every week they come in, you're not sure if they're in a relationship or not. They're still co-parents. Some weeks they're together, some weeks [it's], "Oh, we're done. We're not together while we're trying to work things out." The intimate part goes back and forth, but the co-parenting part is the part we need to try to keep consistent. Helping





parents understand that that relationship is separate. That's step one. You have to define what co-parenting means. Parents will be co-parents no matter what happens to their intimate relationship.

What are some of the benefits of positive co-parenting? What has research told us about why we need to focus on this in our programs? Co-parenting does influence relationship satisfaction, so if people are in an intimate relationship or in a relationship or a marriage, the strength of your co-parenting relationship actually improves your satisfaction with your relationship. If you're on the same page about parenting, if you support each other's parenting, you're likely to have more satisfaction in your relationship.

That's not the whole story, but it's part of it. Better psychosocial and behavioral outcomes for children. Better co-parenting leads to a whole host of better outcomes for children; better mental health, and better behavioral outcomes for children when parents are communicating and getting along co-parenting.

Improved outcomes for children, even with families with a history of intimate partner violence and conflict. I want to highlight that. Families that have had intimate partner violence and really significant conflict. If we can get the co-parenting functioning better, get the communication around co-parenting and focusing on the children, they will still do better. We'll come back to that.

Co-parenting and IPV [Intimate Partner Violence] are modestly correlated with higher co-parenting conflict and less support in those families. We have to be worried about co-parenting and families with intimate partner violence. There tends to be more conflict, less support, more problems and dysfunction in those relationships, so they're harder. They're hard relationships to work on, hard co-parenting relationships to work on, but still important to think about. Now I'm going to turn it over to Alicia who's going to talk about some of the nuts and bolts.

Dr. La Hoz: Thank you. I think of parenting as a teaching opportunity. Oftentimes when we think of parenting or even co-parenting, a lot of times people think about discipline, the timeouts and things like that. I like to think of parenting more as an opportunity to teach children.

Teach them what? Teach them good behaviors, manners, saying please and thank you. Having some sense of hygiene. Everything from brushing your teeth, teaching them character development, don't lie and don't cheat.

How to be able to self-regulate their emotions when they're having a hard time. How do I manage my emotions? How do I manage my feelings? A lot of parenting is about teaching these





little children that are entrusted to us to be good adults and to be able to have healthy relationships in the future.

When we're thinking of co-parenting, how do we do that together? How do we manage that? Whether you're married, you may have differences of opinion of how that can play out, or whether you're single or divorced or in different circumstances. You're going to have those differences of opinion based on your personality makeup.

Perhaps I am someone that likes things to be orderly, logical, sequential, and it's going to be very important for my children to make their bed before they leave the house. I'm going to stick to that and then I'm going to be a very process-oriented person. That's very important. I'm going to really get upset if my spouse or partner doesn't support me in that. Another parent might not think that that's important. It's like spur of the moment, let's go out. You want to go camping? Let's do it. Why do I have to plan that five months ahead, I should just be able to have my child and do it because it's a good idea. You're going to have conflict differences because of that personality makeup, or because of the way that you feel things should be delegated. We have differences in the way one person feels. I should be able to tell you exactly how things are needed to be done, and you do it exactly this way procedurally. Another parent may feel like well, it doesn't matter if the end result is that the bed is made, who cares how it was done.

You have differences in the way tasks are delegated, and so those decisions are mitigated. Those decisions in terms of how we respond to children's emotional need. One parent feels like, "Let him have a temper tantrum. It's fine. Just ignore it. It's all good." Another is like, "No, I can't take it, here have the ice cream, just shut up."

You have those differences, and what happens when we have that conflict in that crash? We fight, we get angry, we start bad-talking to each other, and that starts creating all sorts of circumstances where we're speaking badly about one parent in front of the other, or getting in all sorts of scenarios. We have all sorts of decisions when we're talking about co-parenting that need to be made. Decisions regarding discipline, educational decisions, decisions about division of labor, are they responsible for cleaning their room or vacuuming the house and another parent doesn't necessarily feel that way, and just managing the time and the responsibilities in the home.

In those little tiny tasks, believe it or not all sorts of war zones happen. I mean, going to bed at 8:00 p.m. for one parent could be the absolute rule, and another one's like, "Well, geez, why do you have to be so strict about that? Let them watch a show. It's a weeknight, he's already worked so hard." Before you know it, those little things can activate a war zone between the parents, and the children are the ones that feel the impact of it.





This is the real stuff. This is the nitty gritty of the parenting circumstances, and that's why it makes it so challenging. What we want to propose is the idea that yes, these components and these differences of personality, process, and experiences are going to be there; but, if we're able to help parents have a common vision, and help them be able to communicate and collaborate through those differences, then we can push through, in spite of those differences and nuances.

My husband and I, not too long ago, went to Costa Rica. It's a beautiful country. While we were there, the GPS stopped working at some point. We suddenly felt a sense of angst because it's like mountains and there's no names of streets, and it was like, where are we going. During that anxiety, you just feel a lack of control. How beautiful it is when you have the GPS that you have the home address, and then you have the direction, it takes you step by step. There's that sense of control that you gain.

I like to think about that as a vision for a future. When our children have a direction, when they're able to move forward, it's because they have a secure home base. What we're trying to do as we're establishing co-parenting programs is have them have that safety home base. Where are they speaking from that they have that sense of safety, and as children have that sense of safety, then they're able to have a purpose in the future. They are able to have direction, they're able to go and know where they're going.

What happens when they don't have a safety net where they're coming from? They feel that angst, and we felt it for a minute. Five minutes and we feel a sense of panic. Imagine our children that we're serving that have to deal with this for a lifetime. It creates conditions of anxiety, depression, and angst. Our role as providers is to be able to help our parents work together so that there's that secure home base, and then also that they have a future vision, that common destination.

What do we want for our children in the future? We want them to have opportunities and good educational practices. What is the common ground that despite those differences, we can work toward and have a moving direction? Part of our strategy in co-parenting is helping parents regardless of where they're coming from, to be able to come up with that vision for the future, that direction. When you know where you're going, all this other complicated stuff about who makes the bed, should she wear that, can he wear that, all these complications that often deal with conflict, could be better handled because you have a vision for the future.

What do you want your children to be? I want them to be courageous, to have a sense of purpose, to be able to face the world, and pursue their dreams. If parents are able to have that common vision, then with the current circumstances they're facing, they're able to evaluate it, and then mitigate it and be able to push through the circumstances. Common vision is pretty important in terms of how we would like our parents in co-parenting circumstances to move forward.





Communication, how important that is, and we're going to have a little bit of a vignette in a moment to give you some practical skills of what that would look like. Then being able to collaborate. You can bring these tools of common vision, communicating, and collaborating through all sorts of modalities and approaches to your programs. You can use stories of participants who have graduated from your program. Stories like I mentioned earlier with Desmond Clark and individuals who people look up to, to show, "Oh, it's hard, but you can push through, and you can actually be able to succeed."

You can use apps like we showed earlier with the podcast. We already heard of fatherhood.gov and how it has a plethora of resources that we can download and utilize in order to implement workshops within your programs and within your context. Are your dads dropping off their children early in the morning? Could you give them a 20-minute pep talk? Right then and there before they leave.

Coaching and mentoring are another resource, journaling and reflection as well. What I mean by that is that parents are able to give well when they're able to understand where they're coming from. There's different types of strategies that have been very effective in terms of narrative, telling your own story, and being able to understand and have that sense of self awareness, to then be able to speak forth and speak from parenting practices. A lot of great resources, that you can implement creatively within your program, take some planning and some strategy, but once you're able to do that, it's pretty great.

Going back to common vision. We want to help parents in managing their households' finances, transportation, all the different types of issues that they might have, but again, you want to be able to work with them having a common vision. An example of how practically we've done that in the context of a workshop is we provided a lot of different magazines and have the parents together, regardless of what their relationship status is, cut out pictures that resemble a future vision for their children. They create a collage, and then together build an actual vision statement. Just like businesses, and your nonprofit has a vision statement, why can't families also have a vision statement? What a vision statement does is it creates direction, provides a sense of passion, it's a picture of the future. This is something you can do with parents and it's very effective. They can do that together or as a family. Those are just some ways that you can help families be able to cling toward the future, and you can bring them back to that, because what happens when you lose sight of where you're going, and where you're heading? You go back to the vision, and that vision and that mission helps you get back on track. Same idea with the family formation. As you have that vision for the future, all those other issues of how they're going to manage the household or the finances, you're able to then help guide parents with their parenting strategies.





Next is their communication. Like I said, we can help parents with their communication skills. I'm going to go ahead and read this case study to you, and then I'm going to ask a couple of volunteers to help us out as we're going to do a little bit of a role play to show what that looks like.

Here's Rudy. She's a six-year-old diagnosed with ADHD. Dad is reluctant to give her meds. He's an artist, probably has a couple other jobs to make it work out. Mom is an alcoholic who left the family and shows up erratically. Dad still has feelings for her. Rudy has a younger brother enrolled in a Head Start program. Rudy is unruly in the classroom and Rudy's behavior deteriorates after mom visits and leaves.

We're going to pretend that you are a Head Start provider, and you're concerned with the unruly behavior. You're really concerned that the medication is not being prescribed, it's affecting the classroom and the classroom management. You'd like to draw attention to the dad who's actually the one that you're having the conversation with.

Dr. Stover: Can you define what ADHD is for the audience just in case they don't know?

Dr. La Hoz: Yes, thank you. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a cluster of different symptoms that children manifest. It includes impulsivity, difficulty paying attention and being focused, and it's something that's more diagnosed. It's not just because someone is hyper, because you can have a seven-year-old that's very active and moves around and jumps off the wall. Usually it's related to sensory experiences. There's just a lot taken in so it's difficult for them to calm down, so everything is loud. Think of it this way. You're hearing the air conditioning at 100 percent, you're listening. You're feeling your clothes, you're feeling it, it's all of these. Sensory experiences are very loud, so it makes it difficult for you to concentrate and focus. That's one of the easiest ways I can explain ADHD. Okay so let's start.

Head Start Worker: We're a little worried about your daughter.

Dad: Why?

Head Start Worker: She's having a hard time focusing, and when we do children circle, we talked about what today is and the weather. She can't sit still, and she's always running around.

Dad: Yes, she does have a lot of energy.

Head Start Worker: She's starting to disrupt some of the other children too. They don't understand. Have you talked to your pediatrician about any meds that she needs? Does she have a diagnosis right now?





Dad: Diagnosis for what?

Head Start Worker: Have you taken her to a doctor and talked about her not being able to focus and being fidgety, have you done any of that?

Dad: No.

Head Start Worker: That's hard to do because you hate to admit that, maybe your child has some kind of, I wouldn't call it a disability.

Dad: I'm just curious, why do you think I need to get her diagnosed?

Head Start Worker: Well, at this time we just felt like she could benefit from talking with someone to see if there is ADHD. Which is something that she might have, and if so, sometimes medicine can help.

Dad: Because she has a lot of energy?

Head Start Worker: Yes, because the energy might be affecting her to focus and learn like, if we're sitting around in a circle we're learning about whether, the day and everything, she just cannot sit there.

Dad: I know, but weather is kind of boring anyway.

Dr. La Hoz: I'm going to stop you there. What do you like that they did?

Participant: She is comfortable talking to the dad.

Participant: That's a big thing. Actually, a lot of women don't even want to talk to dad.

Dr. La Hoz: They don't even want to talk to dad sometimes, so she's just warm and nurturing that way. What else did you notice from that conversation?

Participant: She wasn't really pointing out, "Your child has a problem. Your child's a problem child." She's giving examples, she wasn't trying to belittle him or his parenting. She was concerned.

Dr. La Hoz: She was looking at the behaviors and then trying to draw attention to it. That's right. Anybody else?





Participant: I think she did a good job of reading his resistance about, "Wait, there's nothing wrong with my child."

Dr. La Hoz: Yes, because he was resistant.

Dad: Yes, if I push too hard, this isn't going to be helpful.

Participant: He was not combative; he was not angry or negative.

Dr. La Hoz: It was a really pleasant role play, because he could have been really combative and really difficult. We've seen that sometimes, but he was a great dad. He was obviously wrestling with it, but what suggestions would you provide for him?

Participant: Maybe asking questions like, have you noticed it? Has this been a problem? If you can uncover the problem and say, "Well, what would it be like if maybe she was a little bit calmer or easier to deal with?" To try and enroll him and do the persuasion thing.

Dr. La Hoz: "What if?" scenarios during some questions. That's really good.

Participant: Maybe even in the beginning, thanking him for coming to take the time to sit down and talk about it and approaching it from we have this common vision to make sure that Rudy thrives in class, so that it's a common goal that they both have.

Dr. La Hoz: Establish a common platform at the beginning. Really thank him for participating and then saying, this is the common goal that we have for her achievement in the future, and then speaking from that vision.

Participant: I guess, what I'm about to say will really depend on how many conversations they've previously had. In addition to answering questions, we might as practitioners want to stay away from anything that sounds like a diagnosis or suggesting prescribing medication, if this is the first conversation. If it's the second or third, by this time maybe if the dad or mom had taken the child for an evaluation, so now it's all out on the table, then you can then talk about it more broadly, but not the first conversation-

Head Start Worker: I would ask "Tell me, is anything going on at home?" You put in there too that Rudy's behavior deteriorates when the mom visits. I go through that a lot with my clients, so I would just ...

Dr. La Hoz: Explore more, you'd be more curious. Right?





Head Start Worker: Yes.

Dr. Stover: I noticed their behaviors, more difficult on Mondays.

Participant: If it's an established fact and as it appears that she has been diagnosed with ADHD, I would be very reluctant putting my child on meds, so if that was something that was already out there, you've already had discussions. I would have some type of literature that I can provide to say what are the pros and cons, and long-lasting effects and things of this nature, because I wouldn't want to do that.

Participant: I'm just curious. You said ADHD in this one, but autism is also rapidly an ongoing thing in children now. Is it dealt the same way?

Dr. La Hoz: I mean, obviously autism, and there's a spectrum, and we can go into all sorts of trauma we can fill in, right? All sorts of different diagnostics. I think what I wanted to show with this example is that it's pretty complicated. You're dealing with complicated issues with children, as well as with parents, and its multiple systems. What we want to do is just encourage you that regardless of the circumstance, you can have these really good conversations.

As it relates to communication, it could be that you are a provider talking to the father or the mother or them together, and you can have these critical conversations. What's great about it is that the way you moderate it, you're also modeling for the parents how to have conversations that are crucial about the parent's well-being. Let's give these [volunteers] an applause because I thought they were great.

Before I pass it on, just one more thought. We passed these out as tips of communication skills. It just goes through some good rules that you could utilize, and there's different curricula out there and relationship education. This is one version of them, but the idea being that it's just really good to provide some rules of engagement when we have communication. If you're working with a couple, a couple of parents, a dad and their grandmother, whoever it might be, you can introduce some talking principles at the very beginning like these, where you're helping them focus and have the ground rules at the beginning, and then moderate the conversation using these skill sets in order to help move the conversation along.

Things like honing in on the problem, what's the problem? We're going to focus in on it. We're not going to bring every issue out there. The one problem that we're dealing with is that unruly behavior in the classroom, and what can we do about it?





To the extent that you're able to help each parent own their personal responsibility, so they're not doing the attack blaming game, which is what usually happens, "Well, she does this, and he does," we end up doing this, which is not helpful, so you would want everyone to speak from the "I" statement. What is it that you're going to do? What's your responsibility in that role?

You would want to encourage the conversation among the parties that are involved, instead of this whole thing that happens with talking to everyone else, except the two parents that need to be at the table and be involved in the conversation. You would want them to speak about how they feel directly about the circumstance. Share, honestly, and then commit at the end of that conversation with what they would do different. Leave with an action plan, with an agenda. What are we each going to do differently in order to address the issue, so you wrap it up nicely.

This tool, fatherhood.gov, and the different relationship education curriculum are at your disposal. You could bring them to your programs, either on a one-on-one basis or in a workshop setting to help with the co-parenting conversation. I'm going to pass it on, so we can keep talking about collaboration.

Dr. Stover: This is important, and these are important skills as providers. You can imagine if both parents had been in the room with that Head Start provider, and they were having a conversation about the child's behavior, how that could go. You have got two parents in the room, father may be very angry at mom, there could end up being a lot of discussion around her substance use or her unavailability or her inconsistency. You could imagine a disagreement about how the child should be raised that could come up, and you're sitting there as a Head Start provider, or any one of us in our role sitting with the family.

We must have the skills to manage that conversation, and to keep it productive and positive and goal oriented and focused on what the needs of the child are. It takes practice. I mean, I can say, I've been in family sessions before and been like, "Oh, Lord, I'm over my head here." We have to think about how do we keep the family focused on the one issue and not get into the 50 other things that they can bring into the room, and try to help them have a productive conversation that's going to benefit, in this case, their daughter. I really like this as a tool, and we're going to come back to communication in a minute.

If you think about collaboration, how do we help parents be supportive? How do parents be supportive of one another? Sometimes when you're talking with parents, it's helpful to ask them questions to get them thinking about what they appreciate about the other parent. A lot of times, at least the families that I work with, co-parents are really mad at each other, they're not getting along, they're barely speaking, and so my job is to try to help get a little bit more positivity going in between this co-parenting pair. I often will try to help them think about what they appreciate about their co-parent, what's something that they appreciate that their co-parent does for their





child. Maybe they don't like them as a partner, and they were not a great partner, but what is something they appreciate about them, or the way that they're parenting your child? Then how do you support that? The things that the co-parent is doing well, how are they supporting that person to be a good parent? Then think about, are there things that their co-parent does to support them? What are the things that they do? Do they call? Do they send text messages to let them know how the child's doing? Do they let them know what's going on in school? Do they keep them informed in some way? What are the ways that they're supporting each other, and how can they increase that?

We can improve the co-parenting relationship by increasing positive interactions as much as we can and thinking about when one co-parent is falling behind. How does the other one pick up the slack? How do we help? How do we help each other out? We're a team. We're supposed to be a team for our children.

I'm going to spend the rest of the time I have talking a little bit about this Focused Co-parenting Consultation Paradigm, which Jamie McHale, who I mentioned before, has developed. It's really intended to be a framework of how do you think about providing consultation to families around co-parenting.

It's not an intervention or a specific treatment program. It's an idea of how you provide consultation to any families you're working with around co-parenting. It has three different stages, heightening consciousness, selective skill building, and guided enactment. We're going to spend a couple of minutes talking about each of these.

Consciousness building has to do with what we talked about in the beginning. What is co-parenting, and why is it important? In order to build consciousness, people must believe that co-parenting is important. They must understand why they need to think about how to do it better and do it in a positive way. That's psychoeducation, right? Defining co-parenting, talking about why it's important. Thinking together with families about how did we learn to co-parent? What models did we have about how our parents co-parented? What are the things they did well, or maybe the things they didn't do so well that we want to do differently? How did the way our own parents co-parent us, impact us as children?

So many times, we talk about what was your father's role and what did he do, and what do you want to take from that? How did he co-parent with your mom or how did your mom and dad co-parent together? How do you want that to be the same or different in your relationship?

I've also worked with moms who don't feel like the dad is so important. I didn't have a dad; my children don't need a dad, my children are fine. I can't tell you the number of times I've heard that. Sometimes we have to increase moms' understandings of why dads are important and why





co-parenting with the father is so helpful to their children. There is a video called Show Your Love. It's about children talking about the importance of their dads. This is a video resource that I've used with moms and dads. Dads who may be discounting how important they are, it's a nice resource for that. But for moms and helping them think about, "well, what would having a dad have meant to me or how could having a dad be important to my children?" We have to start with that consciousness building, putting it in the forefront of the parent's minds.

The second is **skill building**. How do we then build skills? We've got a set of parents with us or groups of parents who are like, "Oh yes, co-parenting is important." Now what do we do? How do we help them build skills? As I mentioned, one of the things that I like to do is really focus on positive communication and trying to think about how we give compliments. So many of our parents never say nice things to each other, never complement each other on the things that they do well.

When I asked the question, tell me something that you appreciate that your co-parent does, that the mother of your children does or that the father of your children does. Sometimes it's really difficult, but it's really important to take time to think about what those things are. Then think about well, how could you say those things to the other person. Let's practice how we would say those things. Also, how do we accept those compliments? I sometimes will have a set of parents and I'll ask them to say something that that like about their co-parent, something that they do for their child that they like. The person will say it and then the other person was like, "That sounds dumb." They can't accept the compliment, so it has to be working with both to give a compliment and receive it.

Aside from giving compliments, I think also, as Alicia mentioned, making "I" statements and active listening. When we're thinking about solving problems, we can't solve problems if we can't talk to each other and if we can't listen.

I also work with parents on how you listen to each other. We actually practice listening in sessions together, so we'll say, "Now I want you to talk about something silly. Talk about your drive over here." If I'm worried that they had a fight on the drive over I might say, "Tell me what you had for breakfast this morning," and have the other person actively listen.

To actively listen, you have to be looking at the other person. We work on looking at each other. What is the body language? Are you facing the person? Are you sitting with your arms crossed? Are you turned away from them, or are you sitting face-to-face? Are you looking? Are you making eye contact? Are you nodding? Are you summarizing back what the other person said to make sure you heard them correctly? Because so much of what happens in co-parenting miscommunication has to do with, I misperceived what you said, or I misheard your intention.





Parents who are prepared to be in a fight a lot will miss hearing things that their co-parents said, or they'll hear negativity where it wasn't intended. Teaching parents how to listen to each other and check in and make sure they heard each other is very important. Listening means that you're not waiting for your turn to talk.

When we're in disagreements, we are often just waiting for our turn to talk. We aren't listening. I'm not listening to you and hearing what you're saying. I'm just waiting for my turn to say what I want to say. Practicing how to communicate with each other and use active listening when you're not in a disagreement, when you're just talking about regular things helps build those skills. Together with that, practicing how to make "I" statements.

Does everybody know what "I" statements are? "I felt worried when you were late getting home, I would appreciate it if you would call me to let me know you're going to be late."

Participant: "I "as opposed to "you" statements.

Dr. Stover: "You're always late. You never call me when you're late," which is often what we do. We all do it when we're mad. It's important to practice those statements and to say the emotion behind it because usually when we're mad, we're also something else. Sad, worried, scared, so helping parents to communicate those kinds of "I" statements.

Depending on the nature of the relationship, I would suggest focusing them as much as you can on communicating about their children. They don't need to communicate about themselves or their intimate relationship. In these kind of practice sessions, you're trying to get them to talk about their children." It's really hard for me when you don't let me know what's going on with Joe in school, because then he comes to see me at my house, and I don't know that he's having trouble with his math, and I can't help him."

The last phase has to do with **guided enactment**, and this has to do with problem solving. You want to build skills, active listening, and making "I" statements. There are other skills, I'm just focusing on a couple today, but then you want to talk about problem solving. Now you need to get into the hard stuff.

You could sit with parents and go over a 24-hour day if they live together, or you could go over a week if they're sharing custody, perhaps sharing parenting time, and talk about what are the transitions like. What times are difficult? What are the times they get into disagreements? How do the child exchanges go? What are the times that they're struggling? Help them talk together about how to make those smoother while thinking about who. Who do they need to be thinking about? Their children. Always about what's best for their children.





It can be thinking about the difficult time, but people have to have some skills first. I don't tend to jump to these hard things. I tend to try to build some skills and then go to having more complicated conversations. This doesn't have to be over a long time. It can be skill building one time and then the next time you meet with them, you try to work on something that's a little more challenging.

Some problem-solving difficulties might have to do with not feeling supported, going back to those co-parenting areas, support, family management. Who's doing what? How are we managing the family? Who's picking the children up from school? Who's taking them to daycare? Who's dealing with nap time? Who's giving baths? Who's reading stories at night? It can be all sorts of things.

Then the hardest ones have to do about their opinions on how to raise the children. Those tend to be the ones that are the hardest, because there could really be differences of opinion about what's important. Religion and how you discipline, those are the ones that are really challenging.

I just have a couple of minutes before we're going to open it up for questions. I wanted to bring it back to this and just say a couple of things. Can Focused Co-parenting Consultation work with the families that I have up here? Fathers with a history of domestic violence. Do you think this is possible?

Participant: Yes.

Dr. Stover: Yes, I think we have to do it thoughtfully and carefully and with family safety in mind, but yes, it absolutely can. Fathers with substance use problems?

Participant: Probably not when they are using, but if they go through treatment.

Dr. Stover: I would say I agree, getting the substance abuse treatment is important. I think that sometimes having conversations about co-parenting and holding your children in mind can really motivate a person to decide that they need to. I think that you can work co-parenting consultation and co-parenting focused work into substance abuse treatment. I've worked in substance abuse treatment facilities and they do not focus on this much at all. It is something that dads desperately want. How do I talk to my children? How do I talk to my ex-wife about seeing my children? She doesn't even want to talk to me. There's such a need for help around making those connections and reconnecting with the family.

Fathers who are incarcerated? I know some of you do this work. This can start while they are incarcerated. We do not have to wait until release. How can they be involved? How can they be engaged even though they're locked up and they can't come around as much as they would like?





To summarize our key points, co-parenting is important for child development. It is possible in all family types, so I encourage you to think about your caseloads, think about the families you're working with. Who are the co-parents in the children's lives? Who should you be engaging in or thinking about when you're talking to the dad or mom or whoever you work with? Invite grandma in, invite sister in, invite them in, get them involved.

As agencies, even if you're primarily working with dads or primarily working with moms, although I hope you're not, I hope you're working with families; you can provide information and skill building around co-parenting. I work sometimes just one-on-one with dads and I do the skill building with him if I can't see both, or with mom, same thing.

Remember the three C's, common vision, communication and collaboration in terms of thinking about how to build healthy co-parenting with the families you work with.

Dr. La Hoz: Does anyone have any questions?

Participant: What is your advice for a co-parent when their fellow co-parent really is unreasonable, and there is no way to have open communication for a variety of reasons?

Dr. Stover: The co-parent is completely unreasonable and not open for a variety of reasons. You've tried to reach out, you're working with one parent, you've tried to reach out to the other. Now, can I ask a few more details? I mean, we could talk broadly, certainly, but I think it matters. Does this parent have the children?

Participant: They share time.

Dr. Stover: They share time. All right, because it matters a little bit if someone is just not getting access to the children at all. I think that I would reach out and keep reaching out, I don't give up. I think that's one thing. I know that may be an obvious one. I think in my agency, we all try calling once and be like, "Well, they don't want to talk to us." Well, no. I'll keep calling and keep trying. I think the other thing is that you can work with the other parent to think about, what have you tried? What are the ways that you've tried to engage? Try to think through all the different ways that they've tried to reach out and what are the positive things they're trying to do to support that other person. Sometimes, there's such a rift and such a break in the relationship that the other person just doesn't trust having you come around, and so it's going to take many attempts, showing over time that you really are invested and trying to want to do the co-parenting together. Those are my first two ideas out of the gate. Do you have something to add?





Dr. La Hoz: Yes, I would say that when you see resistance, when there's a sense of non-engagement, it's because the heart is not in it. I always like to dig in and figure out what is in the heart, what is keeping people from moving forward and activating? What is at the root of it because if we don't get to the root of it, we can pour a bunch of tools and skills and attempts and all sorts of things, and we just get frustrated as providers because we hit a wall.

We have to explore and figure out what are the underlying circumstances, and I mean this situation can vary widely, but usually there's some thorn in there. Unless that's pricked and discussed and look bad faced, you keep hitting yourself with the wall. There's an opportunity to engage in that heart-to-heart conversation, then it's a little bit easier to have engagement.

Participant: What I find is people show up, so it's not a matter of calling, it's when they come. Like you all gave this honest effort.

Participant: My family is stuck at the source of the problem. Literally, so we can't move forward because it's "he said, she said," and people aren't present. You don't come every week, and we get nowhere even if you focus on the child because you find out there's a block somewhere. People just aren't honest. I don't want to say there is nothing you can do, but ultimately ...

Dr. La Hoz: It's a good point. I know in clinical settings as well as in workshop settings, I've had to set rules where I say, "These words are not allowed the, 'you blaming.'" As soon as they do it, then it's up to you to say, "Okay, I need for you to ..." Literally like I do with my children, put them on timeout, have them step out and cool off, now they can come back into the room.

Sometimes it's within your realm to have control within the little environment that you have, and not perpetuate a circumstance where people are blaming each other and being nasty. Maybe I can't control that in their home because obviously I'm not there, but within the space, these are the ground rules.

Participant: One of the ideas is right before a mediation. We will do something focused, and we will remove the parents and have individual conversations with them. I think one thing that we found is that, in the meeting, I'm talking about our situation, they are actually both being honest.

One situation was with a male who was relocated to another state. He kept saying, "Well, I'm making more money, I'll be making more money." The whole time we're thinking, "Well, why don't you go that extra effort to come see the child?" What I found out was he had the potential to make more money, but he wasn't making more money, but in that general setting, we found this wonderful conversation with them.





It might be a good idea, if you're not already doing it, you might have to pull them aside when you get to that place where there seems to be a block and have that one-on-one conversation, and then ask them if it's okay to share some of that. It may help when you bring them back together.

Participant: I'm doing a workshop at a conference next week on co-parenting. In my research, I came across a term I hadn't seen before called parallel parenting. That's when all else has failed. When the parents just don't want to get along, you can't get them together to have that meaningful relationship toward the child. I don't have it with me, but I found a set of guidelines and a method of co-parenting without contact, because sometimes contact in those situations can be negative. When the parents are so at odds and there's so much conflict and they don't want to see each other, they don't want to know each other, but you still have to find a way for them to share the parenting.

Dr. Stover: Looking into parallel, and some of the resources that are out there, would be helpful in those circumstances. Thank you for bringing that up.

Participant: I had asked a similar question to the larger group [yesterday], to Ms. Sullivan [Office on Violence Against Women], but I guess we need to hear from your experience or anyone else in the room. I asked, just thoughts or last thoughts on co-parenting and those conversations in our country. She seemed to indicate that there was this move and feel with regards to Intimate Partner Violence, from no mediation ever to possible mediation even in cases of Intimate Partner Violence. Is that your experience? Are you hearing any of that? I didn't ask her what precipitated that from her perspective ... [inaudible] ... I don't know if you heard any of that.

Dr. Stover: I haven't been hearing about that. I have a program called Fathers for Change that's specifically for dads who have perpetrated intimate partner violence. This is a topic that's near and dear to my heart. I think there's been a little bit of movement. I haven't heard movement in terms of the mediation part, but I have heard some more movement around trying to meet families where they are.

I think that there's been this push where, even when families want to stay together and work that there can't be mediation or whatever. There's just no working with couples together if there's been any history of intimate partner violence of any kind. What I do think is there's been an acknowledgement that there is a spectrum of intimate partner violence and that there are certainly very dangerous situations where mediation with people together would never be appropriate. I think there's now an acknowledgement that we need to do a better job of assessing individual's circumstances and assess what's best for that particular family, while keeping safety at the forefront of what we're working on. That's the shift I've seen.





Participant: Can I respond to that? I'm at the Office of Family Assistance, and on a federal level I can tell you beyond the Office of Violence Against Women, that the Family Violence Prevention Services program have long looked at that issue, and there is a researcher, Dr. Oliver Williams, who has done research, and produced a paper that addresses fathering after violence.

What the research has shown is that many times victims don't want the relationships to end. They want the violence to stop, and that's where the movement with the domestic violence movement has gone toward that way, and so with all due respect to Ms. Sullivan, there's a different perspective from federal workers and presidential appointees. They don't always know what's going on. She's a presidential appointee, so she doesn't know what's going on necessarily across all federal agencies. The federal government has looked at this. There's going to be a session later this afternoon that addresses domestic violence. There's research that our office has done in conjunction with the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, so you can bring up your question again at that time.

I'm not aware of any movement toward more mediation at all because that goes against what we all know about the dynamics of domestic violence, of that mix of abusers who may still be violent, intimidating and all of those things that will not work with the dynamics of mediation.

Participant: You're saying, you're not sure that people are really moving toward that?

Participant: I haven't heard it.

Participant: We use the Nurturing Fathers Program curriculum, and we tell our men, that's what it's about. It's about nurturing in all our relationships. When it comes to the co-parenting piece, our tendency as human beings in any situation is to judge the other party, and how her co-parenting skills are. We challenge our men to do a self-assessment of various elements of co-parenting. How is my reliability? How is my communication? How is my listening? Rate yourself on these qualities of co-parenting, and honestly assess what you're bringing to the co-parenting table. We've had tremendous results both in situations where dads are living together. Where dads are married, and in situations where there is separation and divorce. If the dad steps up his game and brings his best co-parenting to the table, then he's taking the high road, and he's taking care of business on his side of the street, and situations will be transformed.

Participant: I know it's subjective, but in your practice have you seen where involving stepparents in co-parenting has been effective or helped the dynamic?

Dr. La Hoz: Absolutely. That's a pretty important piece of it. To have all parents be engaged in a common ground.





Dr. Stover: I think sometimes I've done that in a stepwise fashion occasionally where I'll meet with them in separate clusters first and then try to bring, if there's four or however many, all together, once you have a sense of the dynamics and what's going on. It'll just make it easier for you as the facilitator, but I agree that it's important.

Participant: How do you overcome deep seated cultural norms? Because as we become more diverse in nature, you have certain cultural norms of interactions between parenting and women, so on and so forth. That can be very different. That can almost be accorded in the DNA.

Dr. La Hoz: How do we overcome deep seated cultural norms? That's a good question. I know with Family Bridges, we work with a lot of minority populations, and we have culture and generational differences, as well as in terms of different ethnicities or races. It's something that's important to take in account.

At the end of the day, I bring it back to these three components that we talked about. Common vision, because if we're able to articulate clearly where we want to move toward the future, then the nuances of what those differences are, if you are prioritized, or they're made more organized, they're put into context a little bit more. Otherwise we get stuck in, this is the way that this should happen, and she shouldn't wear that outfit because that's this way, and in my culture, you don't do that. You can get all that model. If we go back to what's the future and then using these basic communication skills, I have found that we're able to have good conversations regardless. Bringing them up to the forefront and having those conversations but being able to use these kinds of skill sets helps navigate the conversation regardless, but it's a good point.

Toya Joyner: We are out of time. I would like to thank Dr. Stover and Dr. La Hoz for their great presentation.

