

Signs of Restrictive Gate-Keeping that Harm Children & Adult Children of Divorce

Mary Ann Aronsohn, LMFT & Ria Severance, LMFT

*(NOTE: Even when dealing with untreated, diagnosed mental illness, active substance abuse, and/or mildly abusive/neglectful behavior it is still possible to be nonjudgmental and respectful in your communications with your co-parent, and with your child about your co-parent, without invalidating your child's experience. Do take your children's ages and maturity, as well as the egregiousness of your co-parent's behavior into consideration. **How you support your children matters. You can either matter-of-factly validate your children's challenging experiences in ways that leave them more skilled, or in ways that teach them to be victims of their circumstances.)***

Please initial each page. Circle bullets describing any behavior you may need help understanding and adjusting for your child(ren)'s sakes. Please be as sincere and self-reflective as possible to help us assess your level of commitment to this process, and to your children's wellbeing, before, during and beyond your divorce.

- Refuse to communicate, or drastically limit communication with other parent about the kids
- Make negative comments about ("bad-mouth") other parent, within earshot of kids and/or extended family and friends – blocks kids feeling free to love and respect both parents in extended communities
- Unreasonably inflexible with child scheduling and/or frequently make last minute child scheduling changes
- Withhold rather than share information about children, their activities, school events, needs, medical care, etc.
- Shun and openly avoid/disregard the other parent at children's events, graduations, etc.
- Actively work to exclude the other parent's participation in said activities and/or events
- Plan events to mark developmental milestones, graduations, birthdays, etc. barring the other parent
- Schedule events on the other parent's time, without first asking
- Intrude on or actively disrupt children's time with other parent using non-vital phone calls, texts, or negative comments while child is with, on the phone or on speaker phone with other parent, etc.
- Treat other parent as overstepping or "wrong" for wanting to also be a part of children's lives
- Bad-mouth other parent to school authorities and extended communities to restrict co-parent's access to the children in those realms
- Attempt to micro-manage children's lives during *other* parent's time
- Children's autonomy is underdeveloped in multiple arenas (e.g. not taught or required to regulate emotions, manage routines and schedules despite being young teens, and fully depend on one parent)
- Unilaterally make important decisions about kids, without soliciting other parent's input
- Make false allegations – particularly about verbal, physical or sexual abuse (these traumatize children)
- Create unbending or unrealistic conditions, before other parent allowed to spend time with children
- In child's view, diminish or undermine other parent's authority, value and/or children's respect for other parent
- Promote (indirectly/directly) black and white thinking such that children perceive you as all good, and other parent as all bad, or feel the need to protect/punish a parent.
- Discourage/diminish children's appreciation of co-parent's strengths and contributions to children's development/wellbeing
- Discourage acceptance of co-parent's different ideas and recollections of events, and encourage view of self as holder of "the truth" (versus offering: "Well, I guess your Dad and I just have different ideas about that.")
- Cultivate impression of "owning" the children and/or being the "superior" or "only capable" parent
- In child's view, diminish the quality and nature of the other parent's investment in child's wellbeing, parenting, and/or relationship with the child
- Act/think as if child(ren) have the *same* experience with your co-parent, as you may have had during the marital/primary relationship
- Fail to distinguish co-parent's treatment of you as spouse, from differences in other parent's way of relating to the children.

Initials _____

- Mock, belittle, devalue, berate or otherwise disrespect other parent within earshot of children; Half child's DNA/life experience is from that other parent; Children feel the threat to/rejection of them indirectly or consciously (e.g. "I'm like that sometimes. My parent must reject that about me too.")
- Involve rather than protect children from intricacies of your adult issues/divorce/custody disputes
- Convey, verbally and/or nonverbally (a vast majority of our communication is nonverbal), that children betray or hurt you when they love, spend time, want or show signs of having a viable relationship with other parent
- Threaten your attachment to and/or respect for the children (e.g. using intimidation, threats, snide comments, contempt, belittling, manipulation, guilt, etc.) when children express love, spend time, desire to have, or have a relationship with the other parent; Even saying you "miss" your child pulls on their heartstrings
- Convey that your reality and recollection of events is the only valid, "truthful" reality and recollection of events; Model this approach with children such that they feel they betray you, if they recognize the present/future value to them of the other parent's engagement and participation in their lives
- Place children in a position of having to figure out which parent is "lying," rather than freeing kids from having to hunt down the truth by not sharing divorce/custody-related matters with them in the first place
- Rehash negative narratives about past events or errors made by other parent, or rehash your own negative interpretations and judgments of other parent, thus inviting/encouraging children to do the same, rather than encouraging children to be aware of and engage *the present, as the only place to rebuild or strengthen parent-child relationships* damaged by divorce or past events
- Obstruct the children's ability to freely receive caregiving from the other parent
- Interpret other parent's motives, behaviors, statements, etc. in a negative light *for* the children, rather than teaching children (for their sakes) to offer the benefit of the doubt and to make respectful requests for the specific behavior they want from the other parent
- Endorse or repeat negative stories that cause fearful and/or phobic, hostile or contemptuous responses of children toward other parent, without *real* safety concerns, and without teaching/rehearsing respectful requests for specific desired behaviors and respectful limit-setting (versus complaining, accusing, judging, devaluing, blaming)
- Share or endorse (directly/indirectly) intense negative reactions to the other parent's behavior, rather than strengthening children's resilience and skilled ability to have a respectful voice and navigate your own/other parent's shortcomings; This obstructs their learning to sustain relationships with less-than-perfect people; They feel/interpret what you model – what *you* feel and interpret
- Discourage forgiveness/understanding towards other parent, when even minor errors are/have been made and children's ability to adapt (e.g. Dad home late from work, and teens make selves a sandwich for dinner – this is not "gross neglect" or abuse)
- Fail to firmly require and teach children to engage the other parent in reliable and respectful ways that *serve them* as practice for dealing with challenging authority figures through their lives
- Claim inability to have adequate parental influence to require the children's engagement with other parent, as you require them to attend school (e.g. "I can't force them . . ."); Children learn that respect and relationship with other parent are "optional" and extend impulse to dispense with/devalue imperfect others later extends to other relationships.
- Children feel entitled to discard or devalue other parent; Children lose ability to appreciate and leverage other parent's strengths, and don't learn how to cope and navigate their/your limitations; Their ability to navigate/tolerate differences or to respond adaptively with resilience in future imperfect relationships is damaged
- Child(ren) mind-meld with your views, and align with you against the other parent, and so lose access to whatever strengths the other parent may offer and contribute to their wellbeing and development; Children may not learn to navigate others' short-comings adaptively

Initials _____