

Healthy Family Dynamics & Healthy *Restructured* Family Dynamics

Ria Severance, LMFT & Mary Ann Aronsohn, LMFT

Please circle items in both lists describing any behavior you may need/want 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.

Healthy Family Dynamics & Behaviors

1. Reliable, comforting and secure attachments between parents and kids (*not*: insecure-avoidant attachment, anxious-resistant-ambivalent attachment or disorganized attachment patterns). Children are not treated like objects, to be moved about depending on a parent's agenda. Parents are attuned to their children's development. Parents check in, and don't assume children are experiencing things in the same way parents do.
2. Parents able to track and narrate children's internal states, thoughts, emotions and behaviors in toddler/preschool years, while also preparing them for all transitions (e.g. including diaper changes, changing their clothes, calendars).
3. Internal locus of control is emphasized rather than external locus of control (e.g. When child beams in response to some behavior: "You're so proud of yourself!" versus "I'm so proud of you") with a focus on teaching and reinforcing behaviors that are *effective for the child* in the long run, without a focus on pleasing you as parent.
4. Affection and empathy clearly expressed, shared, acknowledged and received in the various forms these take.
5. Individual differences are acknowledged and appreciated such that all members feel "sufficiently" understood, valued, safe and connected; family members feel they belong, have a place that's uniquely theirs in the family.
6. Open, clear, honest and respectful communication – both listening and verbal/nonverbal expressions (93% of communication is nonverbal). This includes teaching children manners and social niceties that help form and sustain even less intimate relationships, including those with authority figures, or the cafeteria workers, e.g. remembering to greet people, say goodbye before leaving, saying "no thank you" when something is offered that the prefer not to receive, and noticing and thanking people to acknowledge generous behavior.
7. Family members able to ask for the specific behavior they *do* want from others, without accusing, criticizing, blaming or judging. (e.g. "I want you to care about my feelings." versus "You don't care.")
8. Each family member has a clear, respectful voice to share their internal states/feelings, experiences and desires, and is treated/responded to with empathy and respect by others (*not* same as agreeing or giving them what they want).
9. Children are empowered (*with questions*, and without micromanaging/overparenting) by directing them to consider their impact with objective, matter-of-fact curious questions, e.g. "Hmm. I wonder how Susie might feel after you said that?" (without blame, shame, guilt or invalidation) and rehearse ways of behaving and interacting that are more likely to be effective *for them* in the long run.
10. Effective behaviors are valued/reinforced/acknowledged far more often than distress (emotion dysregulation), disappointment and perceived failures (Examples of effective behaviors: emotion regulation, tolerating disappointments, efforts to take on challenges, resilience and learning in the face of failure, with parents teaching related skills and reinforcing these, as well as age-appropriate autonomous use of those skills.) As a result, children feel age-appropriate confidence in their abilities rooted in experience, and do not experience themselves as dependent victims of their circumstances.
11. Parents are clearly the adults and do not use children as "friends" or confidantes; Parents do not "adultify" or "parentify" children to take responsibility for parents' adult emotional needs, desires or expectations, or require children to carry undue, developmentally burdensome "parental" roles and duties for either parents or for siblings.

12. Parents able to tolerate their kids' different views and do not directly/indirectly pressure kids to "mind-meld" with parents' views. With thoughtful questions (instead of mandates!), kids are encouraged to think through the long-term consequences *for them* of their views and how these will impact their future feelings, related behaviors and long-term goals.
13. Family members accept one another, warts and all, free of idealizations and demonizations; no one is painted all black or all white nor treated as such. Individual strengths and challenges are acknowledged and accepted. Children learn to navigate the realities of parental short-comings, while also learning to acknowledge and build on each parent's strengths in ways that serve their own development, such that they are better equipped to sustain relationships with imperfect others throughout their lives.
14. Children experience both parents as caregivers, and easily turn towards both parents as resources, usually for different kinds of help and support.
15. Rather than feeling rejected or threatened, parents recognize and support some stronger affinities between children and the other parent in some areas due to temperament, gender, age, common interests, different strengths, etc. Parents invest in cultivating their own distinct ways of bonding with the children in *mutually* enjoyable ways.
16. Thinking is flexible – members have different ideas and views, without polarizing negative judgments or dynamics.
17. In developmentally attuned ways, family members, including adults, self-reflect, consider their own needs for growth, the short/long-term impact of their behavior on themselves as well as others, and are supported and *expected* to think through, plan and rehearse more effective behavior, without undue shame or guilt. Trust in self/others is built on following through with producing behaviors that are more *effective for that person*, going forward.
18. Members make mistakes, take genuine ownership for their impact and receive forgiveness without disrupting the family unit, or sense of belonging/safety in the family.
19. Members address and manage (versus "resolve") conflict and address family or family member crises/concerns in timely, attuned and reasonably effective ways that empower whenever possible (versus either parent handling/dictating/determining everything).
20. Able to come together to collaborate and engage challenges/tasks faced by individual members as well as family unit.
21. Sustained attitude of benign curiosity and interest in other members, their experiences and wellbeing.
22. Family members are aware of the needs of other members and seek solutions that "work" for all family members (not just a few), while recognizing and accepting when unique accommodations must be made for another, individual member.
23. Healthy, autonomous (age-appropriate) coping skills are expected, taught, rehearsed and modeled – e.g. emotion regulation, self-soothing, distress tolerance, ownership of contributions to effective/ineffective interactions, effective apologies, turn towards other's genuine efforts at repair, turn towards each other with benign interest. Autonomy and responsibility for self (and increasingly for others, as kids mature) are encouraged, alongside a reliable sense of interrelatedness and connection (e.g. basic financial support is not threatened when kids have different desires/dreams than parents).
24. Children given developmentally-tailored choices/options and expectations. Expectations are skills-based, reasonable, age-appropriate and realistic *given the level of support provided* and the child's skills mastery; Expectations are fulfilled more often than not (i.e. family members are able to live up to their own expectations more often than not). Adults and children do not feel "entitled" to generally unreasonable or developmentally unreasonable expectations of one another. Parents model what they preach in this regard.
25. Children are not enabled to avoid their developmental tasks, by pathologizing, ignoring or enabling their fears and/or ineffective (*for them!*) behaviors. Parents build on their children's strengths and

- successes, and encourage children by preparing them (e.g. rehearsing how they will face/address their fears, handle a given situation skillfully).
26. Structure, routines and rules are reliable, clearly stated, evenly applied with respectful input from children, and are *designed to empower kids to be effective* at managing their own lives and relationships going forward (without over- or under-reliance on parents). Children self-directed because learn/take ownership of their own age-appropriate routines without relying on parent reminders.
 27. Power is shared (in developmentally attuned ways) and paired with corresponding responsibility. Children are taught to manage their own time, routines and free time, and to be accountable *once sufficiently skilled*. Parents prepare kids to gain freedom and the right to make independent decisions based on trust grown from their *demonstrated* ability to follow through independently (doing what they said they'd do by when they said they'd do it), and to independently assess (out loud) logically and reasonably for: their own safety, their impact on others, the wellbeing of others, and other developmentally-matched concerns.
 28. Because parents followed through with sufficient support to ensure directives were followed when children were young, older children are able to follow directives without power struggles, and to offer win-win alternatives that respect themselves as well as the adult/others (e.g. I signed up to do that chore Wed, and I have other chores today – is there some reason this can't wait?)
 29. Children are taught and actively encouraged to:
 - a) Carry their own weight in developmentally appropriate ways that prepare them for life beyond home (e.g. cooking for selves, doing own laundry, keeping room tidy – all prep for time management when in college/trade school/work, and for shared, collaborative living with roommates),
 - b) Share in contributing to the family's wellbeing (e.g. share in family-focused chores such as emptying the dishwasher, meal prep, taking out trash) without expecting something in return.
 - c) See/experience school and related school work as a *privilege for their benefit*, rather than satisfying parental expectations or desires. Parents are clear that *they get nothing from their children's school performance*, such that children see academic efforts as time to live into their own dreams, and create a more viable life *for themselves*. When children fail to invest sufficiently in their own wellbeing (e.g. self-care, family-care and schooling), parents require children to carry more of their own weight at home, as "extra" parental support is contingent on children's wise investment in themselves (e.g. if you're not invested in your school, you can start mowing lawns and help pay for your extra sundries and clothes). Parents do not allow themselves to invest more than children do (in age-appropriate ways!) in their wellbeing.
 29. Allowances are given to help children appreciate and manage money, *not for self-care in household* (e.g. not paid for doing own laundry) or contributing their share of effort to the family's functioning (e.g. not paid for washing dinner dishes). For example, an amount is given for a high school semester of purchased school lunches and kids can save from that for birthday gifts for school mates by learning to prepare their own nutritionally balanced lunches at home. Extra money for larger items is earned for paid extra work that parents might pay others to do (e.g. weeding, babysitting younger sibling, washing the car, bathing and grooming pets – not at adult/professional wages!)
 30. Parents help prepare children to be skilled in the world *beyond home* from the outset – emotionally, socially and academically. Children's interests are nurtured, their experiences are enriched e.g. they're largely prepared to work independently by High School, without hand-holding so they're equipped in college/trade school/work. Children take on their own college/trade school loans, depending on kids' investment in their educations (e.g. parents offer to help contribute to reimbursing loans for only those terms when XYZ grades/internships were achieved/completed). Children begin volunteer internships in High School that equip them to compete effectively for paid and unpaid internships in their areas of interest in college/trade school to ensure they are employable at the time they graduate (they can't be otherwise).

31. Shared traditions, rituals and stories are enjoyed mutually. Time shared as a family is set aside mindfully and regularly, and is planned with input from members to engage the interests and desires of all members.
32. Humor, fun, play, joy and lightness are balanced with the tasks of living, work, and school.

Healthy Restructured Family Dynamics

1. Healthy family dynamics are sustained across households, while parenting styles, strengths and challenges, as well as expectations, may differ. Parenting styles, strengths and challenges are typically different, without being polarized/blaming the other parent, and children are empowered to benefit from parental strengths in each household, while navigating parental challenges.
2. Households cooperate to ensure kids regularly see and sustain bonds with parents and extended family. Neither parent acts as if s/he “owns” the children.
3. Adults manage, encourage and ensure contact between children and other parent figures (phone, video chats, etc.) at scheduled times, either regularly and/or with flexibility in accordance with agreements.
4. Parents respect boundaries of children’s scheduled time with other parent.
5. Before jumping to negative conclusions, co-parents give each other the benefit of the doubt. They recognize they may only be getting “pieces of information” from children. Rather than grilling a child, co-parents able to go to other co-parent for clarification (e.g. “Juan said X. Can you shed some light on this please?”). Neither parent goes back to child and *makes child feel badly* for having shared information with the parent that now has questions, thus both parents avoid creating distrust with the other.
6. Foster/empower kids’ skillful ability to speak up respectfully, consider their own contributions to ineffective interactions, sort things out with the other parent, and appreciate that parent’s contributions to their wellbeing/development. Disrespect towards the other parent is not tolerated or ignored.
7. Children have a voice about their preferences, while parent figures remain in charge of adult decisions about the divorce – “kids have a voice, not a choice.” (e.g. going to school, seeing other parent invested in their wellbeing without expecting that parent to be perfect – kids not allowed to discard or disrespect a parent invested in their wellbeing). Children are *expected* to accept parents as they are, and as they are not, with resilience and a flexible ability to adapt.
8. Transitions are designed to eliminate and buffer children from unnecessary stress (e.g. help prepare child to anticipate the transition with positive expectations, avoid child having to leave one parent to be with the other (parent-to-parent transitions), avoid making child leave fun social engagements on weekends to transition to other parent).
9. Both households respect the other’s guidelines, rules, and differences, with acceptance and grace, and co-parents foster kids’ resilience/adaptability across households (e.g. “So, Dad got off work late, and you made yourselves some sandwiches – you were adept at taking care of yourselves!” versus “What! He didn’t even prepare a meal for you?” and “Mom’s house, Mom’s rules; this house, these rules” – no negative judgment, just different.)
10. Parent figures communicate as needed to put responsiveness to children’s age-appropriate needs in the foreground, and are able to seek and use help from intermediaries/professionals as needed, for their kids’ sakes.
11. Co-parents are each able to discuss differences and concerns, and work cooperatively for the children’s wellbeing, regardless of their ages, without presenting selves as the “superior” or “only capable parent,” and without excluding the other parent.
12. Parents acknowledge the right as well as the need for kids to have ongoing contact with a parent who remains invested in their wellbeing, despite differences in parent’s styles, strengths and challenges.
13. Children are able to see both parents as having strengths and flaws. Parents support kids’ learning to accept and navigate each parent’s flaws skillfully, and to acknowledge and learn from their strengths.

14. Parents explicitly acknowledge positive strengths of the other in presence of other parent/children, and explicitly affirm the aspects of the children that reflect the other parent's strengths.
15. Children are able to acknowledge each parent's strengths and challenges such that neither parent is viewed as "all good" or "all bad," or in need of protection/punishment. They thus learn to effectively navigate and sustain meaningful relationships with imperfect people in the long run.
16. Children exhibit age-appropriate capacity for seeing and tolerating different perspectives, and are able to adjust their perspectives to incorporate new or valuable information/experiences, both within the family and their social relationships.
17. Children able to be affectionate, engaged, can turn to both parents for different kinds of help, and can speak freely with both parents about time spent with the other parent.
18. Children comfortable engaging with both parents' extended family and friends.
19. Households able to support the other's discipline – which is aimed at: a) empowering, skills-building (kids *may* experience having to rehearse new skills as "punishment" and yet it's the only "punishment" that research says works in the long run), rather than b) "punishment," that aims to hurt/impose adverse consequences on them (note: research shows this kind of punishment doesn't work in the long run).
20. Some limited flexibility in parenting schedule is tolerated to ensure the schedule is child-centered, without abusing that flexibility. Parents consider agreeing to a parenting schedule even for adult children, so children are not torn or forced to choose between parents for holidays, etc.
21. Some cooperative guidelines exist across households, especially when a child shows signs of distress, to ensure child is explicitly empowered to handle guidelines skillfully in both homes. Both parents avoid either assuming/treating the child as fragile or incapable, or putting the child in sink-or-swim circumstances the child does not have the demonstrated skill to handle.
22. Parents include the other parent in the child's life (e.g., medical, social, educational).
23. Parent figures and extended family are able to navigate children's events, developmental milestones, activities and appointments *inclusively* with enough civility and grace to buffer children against experiencing adult tension or conflict. Kids experience their extended communities as coming together around their needs, milestones, successes, etc.
24. Co-parents understand that the research is clear: toxic levels of stress between them, whether overt or covert, filter down onto children and hijack their internal resources, obstructing their ability to engage their own development (whether conscious of this or not), and causing significant damage to their physical, intellectual, emotional and behavioral wellbeing.
25. Parent figures communicate directly, *not through the children*, and keep children buffered and away from any adult conflict, negative judgments, accusations and adult relationship issues.
26. Biological parents remain primary decision-makers, stepparents observe reasonable and respectful boundaries. All caregivers avoid bad-mouthing the other parent in any way that can come back to the children/adult children. Children know that half of who they are descends from the other parent!
27. Parent figures explicitly support children's relationships with all their loved ones.
28. Blame- and judgment-free narratives about why biological parents divorced are shared with children as well as friends and family, so children are free to love both parents wherever they go in their extended communities.
29. Biological parents create and agree to "mission statement" including their highest values about how they'll specifically behave as co-parents. They do their best to live up to those, get help from professionals as needed, and include new partners, when applicable, in those behavioral values/expectations.
30. Parents each able to identify/describe how child(ren)'s experience/interpretations of the other parent co can be/is valid and *yet distinct* from your own experiences/interpretations during marital/primary relationship. Children are free to describe/interpret their experiences on their own terms, without having to "mind-meld" with either parent's views.

31. Parents able to identify/describe how co-parent's treatment of you as a spouse/partner, can be/is distinct from that co-parent's behavior towards child(ren).
32. Parents are able to identify/describe difference between their own childhood trauma and any traumatic experience for children. Parent's conscious/unconscious trauma is not projected onto children. Parents understand the severe trauma inflicted on children when one parent *falsely* accuses the other of neglect, or verbal, physical and sexual abuse, and is careful to avoid this. False allegations, the repetition of related negative narratives and the interventions that follow from agencies/professionals traumatize even adult children in distinct ways.
33. Parents both able and willing to encourage and support children's engaging *the present, as the only place for children to experience reliable caregiving by the other parent, and to rebuild and strengthen parent-child relationships* damaged by divorce or past events.
34. Parents able to sustain a focus on the present, and relinquish rehashing negative narratives about past events or errors made by other parent, and relinquish rehashing their own negative interpretations and judgments of other parent with the children, while strongly encouraging/requiring children to do the same so they are free to benefit from the other parent's caregiving and strengths.
35. Parents skilled at effectively exerting adequate parental influence to require the children's engagement with other parent, just as you require them to attend school. Children are explicitly taught (as evidenced by their behavior) that respect and relationship with other parent are "a given," and not optional (unless *clear evidence* of neglect or abuse as assessed by professionals, relevant agencies and/or the Court).
36. When divorce/custody are litigated, parents are able to consider whether a given event may have been a legal strategy guided by zealous lawyers in an adversarial system, rather than assuming a given event was initiated by the co-parent.