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# Co-Parenting Journey

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## Preparing for Battle, on the Inside



### **Taking the armor off amidst a high-conflict co-parent**

My experience with co-parenting is a long, hard, zig-zag kind of story. I do not claim to be perfect, but I do know my own intentions. Despite my own work, the co-parenting relationship that I am living is a hard one.

I have always considered myself a great communicator, a leader, and outgoing. I have believed my co-parent to have similar qualities. When we try to communicate, however, there is little success actually solving problems. I am an action-oriented person, I start moving when I see a path to completion. This is not to say I cannot procrastinate on crafts and household projects - these are not things I am passionate about. I am passionate about my role as a mother, and a parent to our children. I do want to improve our communication, I am dedicated to this mission.

We pay for a 3rd party to sit with us and monitor our conversations, help us work through concerns, and well, keep me emotionally and physically safe. I do not say this without realizing it insinuates I may be in danger because I am in danger in the presence of my co-parent. Name-calling, yelling, lying or changing the facts, making off-hand comments at inopportune moments are all examples of some of the attacks I experience when we meet. The professional is there to help us, and with her there, I feel like I just might have a chance to walk out (emotionally) alive.

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The work of Brene Brown has been essential in helping me ground myself and avoid stepping outside of my values when I am in the co-parenting arena. When I step into the arena of co-parenting therapy, I could be armored up and ready to battle every accusation and unfounded allegation - but I choose to tackle our issues with a clear set of ideals.

First, I have done the value work through the Dare to Lead 2-Day Training and workbook. I have identified some key values that are driving my feelings, thoughts, and behavior. I think it is crucial to start the value work before moving forward but that doesn't mean you have to be rock solid, you can adapt your values list as you encounter situations that provide insight.

The following is a checklist Brene explains in Part 2 of *Dare to Lead* (Brene Brown, page 198-201) and also available at <https://daretolead.brenebrown.com/workbook-art-pics-glossary/>. If I can show up living out these 10 points, I know that I have the right goals in mind and that I am owning my part of this equation.

**1. I can sit next to my co-parent, rather than across from him.**

Physically this can be a challenge depending on how the therapy room is set up. I do not feel 100% safe being close to him but I can do it when I am by the door and when the therapist has shown themselves to be a safe mediator. This has not always been my experience, but I show up to our new therapy office ready to sit next to him.

**2. I choose that I can put this co-parenting problem between us, and not slide it toward him.**

I can be a pill to work with due to my need for input. I ask a lot of questions and often pick things down to a detail to be sure I understand. I need information, probably for some reason rooted in fear - but right now, I still need it. I also know that he has a tendency to generalize statements and this runs contrary to my need for detail. Therefore, we both have some work to do to make sense to each other, this is not his problem.

**3. I choose to accept that I may not fully understand his concerns and feelings.**

Questions are part of my DNA, I love to gain insight...so why do I shut down when my parenting teammate is the one who needs to spill? Mainly I struggle listening to name-calling and accusations but underneath all that crap, are feelings and his own concerns. This means I need to listen to what is under the hurtful words and accept that he has an experience all his own, I need to try and understand it.

**4. I can acknowledge his strengths instead of picking him apart.**

I feel like I am really good at this part. (Pat on the back.) I make sure to say comments and provide information that encourages his involvement. The last thing I want to do is have someone focus on all my mistakes and imperfections. That is my current plight but

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nevertheless, I refuse to do that to him or anyone. I try to meet needs that have been expressed. When he is pointing out my mistakes, I see he is able to indicate what is not right - identifying the problem is a strength. "I can see you found a problem. How can we address it? What's next? What is your concern?" There are numerous ways I could snap back, but I choose to show up by acknowledging his strength of pointing fingers, even if they are at me.

**5. His strengths could ultimately be what helps us solve these challenges.**

Expressively identifying when I see a strength that is not being used is my role as a teammate. At work, I call on the individuals who can do the job well. I use this same concept when we run into a situation that I feel my co-parent can handle better than I, a talk about boy stuff or a non-judgemental issue with our daughter, I send him a text. "I was hoping you could talk to [son] about his ... I do not know much about this kind of stuff."

**6. I can hold my co-parent accountable without blaming or shaming him.**

The above-mentioned example should communicate, "I trust you know more about this than I, or you have done a great job in the past." In my situation, it works the way I imagine it should about half the time. The other half of the time, I get snide remarks and come-backs like, "You should have already handled that" or "I did talk to him, but you know that, you're just trying to be difficult." This is a real arena moment, when my strengths come into play. "Awesome, thanks for taking care of it. I knew I could count on you." There is no need to play this fiddle or dig in, it is time to lean in. "Thank you, I appreciate your help with this" speaks volumes without shaming or using blaming language.

**7. I must be open to owning my own part.**

But do I have to? Yes. I am a part of this too. I need to practice upholding boundaries that I set and be consistent with what we have agreed on in past conversations. No alienating comments about him or our issues in front of the kids and no BS. Just playing it straight can be harder than it sounds when you are constantly hiding from a bulldozer.

**8. I can express genuine gratitude for his efforts and not criticize his failures**

Truth be told, I need some work applying generous assumptions here. I struggle to see that he is motivated by the right reasons when it comes to co-parenting situations. My assumptions fall in the pit. But, if I am to do the work, I need to show gratitude for any step in the right direction. No matter how slow, how indirect, and how many times it was discussed and nothing happened. This is by far the hardest area for me, but I am owning my part and leaning in.

**9. I am ready to talk about resolving our challenges and looking toward growth.**

Yes! *This is me*. I want an action plan. I think in a straight line. Linear. Movement. End point. When I am addressing a stressful problem - I go straight to the clipboard and start collecting

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data, I think in a tunnel. But when I approach a co-parenting issue, I want to talk about a resolution. The trouble is, when I leave our meetings, I often feel anything but a tangible action plan in our midst. I feel let down, confused, and in mental disarray. When I push for a more stringent sequence of tasks, I often get called names such as *controlling, manipulative, and bossy* ["Don't tell me what to do."]. I stay ready for action and call out when I see a possibility.

#### **10. I model the openness I need to see, the vulnerability of showing up each time.**

I cannot explain why I want to get this right, but I do. I really want to make our communication harmonious and conflict-free. I show up - on time, everytime we have an appointment. I make sure I am not late to pick up or drop off the kids (it has happened a few times). This behavior is not mirrored back, I am not seeing it yet. 10 years and I am still waiting outside houses and dodging conflicting statements but I show up every time. I do what I have agreed to do, and when I cannot commit, I don't. I ask for time to review the question, I ask for time to get more information, I ask questions. I come in with a good outlook and feeling ready to work. My commitment has zero to do with his attitude, but I have been affected. I see the armor come up after a few rounds of getting nowhere, and I feel it after about 30 minutes in a therapy session - when he has interrupted me 12 times and refused to hear me out. I see it at 5:42am when he texts some BS from a conversation 3 days before, when he just spouts off a hurtful comment or attack. But I show up, everytime. I ignore the comment. I respond business-like, I disregard the fact that he woke me up to tear me a new one at the break of dawn. I show up. I show up for me and I show up for my children, and yes, I show up for my co-parent.

I make a meaningful decision to approach this high-conflict relationship with a ready-to-work approach. I even make it a habit to call my ex-husband "my co-parent." This is very purposeful. Like it or not, he is on my team. We are co-parents. If I choose to call him something else, "my ex", "the kids' dad" I am separating him from me, my team, my family. And forever, he will be connected to me. I have made the choice to show up and open the door to him. I will not allow him to use power-over and I will not accept abuse, but I show up hopeful things improve a little each time.

**Bricks in my Backpack** is a resource my daughter developed and together we are sharing our experiences to help others through similar situations. It is a free resource including downloads and templates for tough conversations.