

The “Relationship Short Story” Worksheet

An essential element of effective co-parenting is the “**short story**” you each tell yourselves and others about what happened to your relationship. The “short story” can be even a sentence or two, and tells what was valuable, and what happened, *without assigning any blame or negative judgments* to either of you. Usually it is a sad story, and can help soothe some of the pain and anger that’s arisen from the history between you. Some co-parents have emailed their collective extended families and friends together, and used the agreed-upon “Short Story” to clarify or *redefine* their separation/divorce in new, blame-free terms. The story serves as the “party line” you share, and *allows your children, as well as extended friends and family, to love you both, without feeling pressured to take sides.*

Here are some examples:

#1: “*We think SO differently that we had trouble understanding one another. Because we didn't understand each other, we lost compassion for one another, and our love died.*”

#2: “*When we needed help, we didn't get the help we needed to grow the skills that would have made a loving relationship possible. Since that time, we have hurt each another so much through the court system, that there's no chance we could ever trust each other again.*”

#3: “*We had so much fun together for a long, long time, and yet we didn't know how to grow together. Because we are so different and didn't understand each other, we didn't grow as friends. Therefore, we were never able to develop a “we” kind of teamwork in our relationship.*”

Notice the “*we-language.*” Use “we” language to empower yourselves to work towards being on the same page for your childrens’ wellbeing.

Instructions: Curb any impulse to blame your co-parent. You both had a part in creating whatever you did and didn’t create together...and your children need to hold onto a *blame-free* story. This blame-free, shared-responsibility story grants your children permission to love both of you, and by extension, to love the parts of themselves that are like each of you.

Focus what you had together that was valuable, and how it was lost, sharing responsibility, free of blame or negative judgment. When you have it right, it will just feel sad, while honoring what was valuable. (Use back if needed)

You may wish to edit/alter or add some elements of the following basic “divorce explanation” a few experts recommend for children:

“We (your parents) loved each other very much. We really thought we could make a life together. We tried our best and couldn’t make our relationship work. [Yes, this assumes that people do the best they can.] We’re so sorry about how that hurts you and forces certain changes on your lives. At the same time, we want you to know that we both love *you* very, very much. We will both stay close to you, helping you to grow up strong and happy. And we both want you to know that you had *absolutely nothing* to do with our splitting up. Our making or not making our relationship work is about our own grown-up stuff, and has ***nothing*** to do with you.”

Once you have it right for yourself, ask your co-parent if you can both share your thoughts about this, or share it with your co-parenting specialist. Ideally, you expand the story to include elements of the other's thoughts. If not, at least have your own “blame-free” story. You’ll find yourself more at peace when you can tell yourself and others this kind of blame-free story rather than being emotionally stuck in an angry story or a victim story. Our thoughts and narratives typically drive our feelings as well as our behavior.

What you tell yourselves makes a powerful difference in how you’ll parent and co-parent your children for years to come.