

Extract from

THE NEXT BEST THING

- WHEN DAD AND MOM DO NOT LIVE TOGETHER

(Professional literature)

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Before you read this extract, I hope you first of all will take the time to read the translated references and reviews of my book. (In the end of this document.)

The translator of this extract is not a professional translator. My book has been acclaimed for a special way of writing/telling important point of views, and I am not sure, you can read/ see that in this translation.

Therefore I wish that you keep the references and reviews of my book in mind, when you read this extract ☺



"This book should be obligatory for all parents, no longer living together."

Admin. Dir. Helle Laursen Petersen, delebarn.dk



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Extract from the

Preface

It was the most difficult and most painful process I have experienced in my life: breaking up the family that once meant everything and was the fundament of my child's life; particularly exposing my child to joint custody between the two people that meant most to him; the hardest element being perhaps the fact that I alone wanted a divorce.

In my attempt to bring us all three through the break-up in the best possible way, I searched for examples of the good divorce. My greatest wish was that we could give our child the best possible upbringing in spite of the conditions as a child of divorced parents and as a joint custody child. The more literature I studied, the more I was confronted with negative consequences for such a child. I became less and less confident at the same time as a bad conscience built up. When I broke up my family, I was already burdened by an enormous bad conscience and a feeling of inadequacy. I therefore did not need to read of the negative consequences for children of divorced parents that only made my feeling of failure worse.

The book that I needed when the family break-up was a reality was the account of children that could avoid feeling divided, disloyal and whatever else can be the consequences for children in connection with a family break-up. The account that shows that children could come through it intact, even though their parents have joint custody. The account that shows the successful co-existence and cooperation between parents and later also between step parents (bonus parents).

I needed then to believe that we could give our child a good alternative to the nuclear family now that we were in a situation where we saw no other solution than divorce.

A decade has now passed since I searched for the good account with the positive examples. Even though I was not successful in finding the recipe for a good divorce, we succeeded in finding the right ingredients. They are the success behind our account.

When Emil's father and I split up, I did not dare to hope to all intents and purposes that we could come to where we are today. I lacked the account with the happy end and not least the account that showed that it did not have to develop detrimentally before effort was made to achieve the happy end.

I have therefore written the book that I myself then searched for and needed. You as parents can still create a good and secure childhood for your child – also even though you no longer live together. The next best thing can also be good enough.

Extract from Introduction

The Family History

However, some new needs within myself gradually came to light. I began to notice some things were missing in our relationship. I was very confused and became more and more unhappy but I could not manage – or we could not manage – to solve the problem. Later, it became also evident to my son's father how unhappy I was, and that for some time I had become withdrawn and was actually in the process of leaving him emotionally. It was a difficult and unhappy situation for both of us. At that time, we had been partners for nearly eleven years, our son was barely four years old and we had until then believed that we should be together for ever.

After our break-up, I was in the home of Emil's father, where we spoke of his frustration over the fact that I had found another man. I told him that I sincerely hoped that in ten years' time he would be over his frustration and anger and perhaps could even sit and drink coffee together with my new boyfriend. Emil's father replied that it was precisely what he also hoped for. I remember answering that then it might just take five years. It barely took three years.

Today I live with my husband and our daughter. My husband's son lives with us a third of his time. Emil's father and his bonus mother do not live particularly far from us.

In the middle of it all is Emil, as part of a large family.

Extract from Chapter 2

In agreement about splitting up

It would be an advantage if during the proceedings of a divorce and in the whole course before and after the break-up, you are aware that we as humans can regress in our development. When we are going through a crisis and in the first period react to that which is lost (reaction phase), we sometimes regress. We regress to a former stage of development and tend to view the world in black and white. It is a question of either/or and nuances disappear.

In some situations we regress to such an extent that we practically view the world as when we were children. *"You are the most egoistic and mean person I know and you have never once thought of me and what I need."*

To communicate with people who are so rigid is in itself difficult. For that reason alone, you have harder conditions for proper conversations together.

So when you react to your loss, you can easily place the responsibility for that which you yourselves feel guilty about, on to each other. This is called projection. Quite simply we try to blame the other in this phase.

Projection is a defence mechanism that reduces your feeling of guilt and sense of being threatened.

In reality you should not consider it as the one or the other's fault. Both partners have a share in the fact that the relationship failed. The issue here is what is between the two people, that is to say their relationship and what otherwise affects it. No-one is to blame but there are basic causes for a break-up.

Perhaps you each can better take each other's hard and unreasonable comments when you know what causes them.

At some point the both of you will move on in the crisis, where your dialogue has better terms. It will happen alongside your adjusting more and more and eventually moving out of the acute crisis, of which the reaction phase is a part.

The next phase is one of coming to terms with the situation and it is still part of the crisis. But, by then, you are more able to face the future and you are not so "trapped" in the traumatic experience of the divorce. This gives in itself a greater opportunity of having a better dialogue. Among other things, it is also due to the fact that you are no longer just as one-sided and unreasonable in your thoughts about each other and the situation.

The development throughout the crisis must be seen over a longer period:

When Mikkel and Katrine split up, they were both extremely unhappy, but they reacted differently: Katrine reproached Mikkel for having been so busy renovating their house. She thought that if he had instead put more effort into their family life, it would perhaps not have come so far. Katrine often repeated this to Mikkel after their break up.

Mikkel was very sad about it. He had, in fact, put so much energy into their house for the sake of the family, so that in future they could have the best possible base that could create the framework for their family life.

Mikkel did not show how hurt he was by Katrine's reproaches. Instead, he became really angry and this resulted in vehement discussions in which they accused each other of all sorts of things. For a long time after the split up they were not able to talk to each other without loud discussions.

Mikkel quite quickly found another woman, who, unlike Katrine, confirmed him in the view that he was a good man. She appreciated him for being so diligent. Even though they moved into a house in dire need of refurbishing, he spent far less time on the house than he spent on Mikkel's and Katrine's house. Katrine noticed this and it hurt her enormously and she became so terribly jealous and bad-tempered.

Katrine did not want Mikkel to find out that she felt let down because of Mikkel's new, in her view, better way of giving priority to his family – something she used to wish for. Therefore she appeared cold and indifferent when they at times met regarding the children. Katrine did not know that Mikkel had changed just because he had heeded Katrine's message. She had taught him how important it was to spend more time as a family instead of spending more time on practical tasks.

No more than a couple of years had passed when Katrine and Mikkel spoke of the fact that Mikkel's house was beginning to take shape. It was then that Mikkel told Katrine that he had learnt a lot from her, among other things, how important it is that, for example, the renovation of a house does not fill too much in relation to family life. Katrine was quite relieved. So it was not because she and the children had been of no importance and that Mikkel's new family meant everything.

She was able to say to Mikkel that she had certainly not appreciated Mikkel's efforts around their home enough while they lived together.

Katrine's and Mikkel's account is the example of how their rigid view of each other became more nuanced – in line with their coming through the crisis and eventually being able to see the situation in a greater perspective.

Focus Points

When your ex-partner behaves unfairly;

then remember that people in a crisis find it easier to reproach – than take responsibility and that anger is part of the process of grief.

When you have been unfair and realise it;

then say it out loud to your ex-partner.

Things can be said in a black/white way – "you have always/never" and so on

It is a natural reaction when something is emotionally difficult.

Look beyond primitive remarks from your ex-partner

Behind these remarks, there is a yearning in a hurt and unhappy person who feels let down.

If your ex-partner appears cold and indifferent;

then remember that shock and inner chaos are probably the reason, even though the outer appearance seems controlled.

Say that you find your ex-partner indifferent so that you can get an explanation.

Explain that you are not cold and indifferent – if you are not in contact with the difficult emotions

In this way you more easily avoid misunderstanding and hurt feelings in your ex-partner.

If you have the energy, then try to remain constructive – also when the other is not

With the good approach, more good most often follows.

If you are depressed and in no way feel that there is an improvement in your state of mind;

then take into consideration the need for professional help, if you continue not to thrive.

Sort out and discard the tasks you do for the sake of others

Focus on yourself and your family. You all are in need of it.

Extract from Chapter 3

When the break-up becomes a reality ... also for the child

You probably are in a whirlwind of feelings. Within that whirlwind, you have to address practical circumstances that have to be settled in connection with the break-up. It can be difficult and often demands a great deal of energy, at a time when you are possibly in great internal chaos. As parents, you can easily find yourselves in a situation where you have to try to find the energy that is simply not at hand. However, we humans can sometimes succeed in finding unknown strengths. If possible, you can consider this as a period you have to go through before your lives become more settled.

A divorce can be compared to the loss of someone closely related. Often grief in connection with a divorce is compared to loss through a death. Shortly after a death, many practical decisions in connection with a funeral or a burial, division of the estate etc. have to be addressed.

All the more reason to remember, as far as possible, to take care of each other in this period. If both partners agree that it is the right decision to leave each other, perhaps it is easier to work together and plan how the break-up shall take place.

Due to the fact that Emil's father wanted us to stay together, he did not take kindly to my decision to move out and live with my sister for a while. At the same time, he understood that I could see no other option and he therefore supported my decision – at any rate, by talking to me about how we could best possibly show consideration for Emil when I was to move out. So even though Emil's father was powerless and emotionally could not back up the break-up, he was with me in the planning of how everything should take place.

He has recently told me that he had to restrain himself, among other things, when we together told Emil that I was to move out. I asked him how, in spite of that, he was able to back me up. He explained that his focus was on Emil and his needs.

We also cooperated in planning when Emil should respectively live with his father and with me. We both wanted to prepare ourselves for how we could take care of Emil, who was then barely four years old, now that we were to turn his life upside-down.

We agreed that we should see to it that the kindergarten was informed before I moved out. We spoke of how we would tell Emil what changes would now take place in our family. I was immensely relieved that Emil's father was positive when we prepared and told about my move, even though it was not what he wanted. Right from the beginning, we made sure we spoke of things in a good way, also of things that were difficult for us.

It sounds easier said than done. But, actually, it was not so difficult:

We viewed the situation differently because we wanted different things for our family life. But we tried to explain ourselves to each other and listen to that which we each told. At the same time, there was room for Emil's father to express now and then how frustrated he was over the fact that I moved out. I could certainly understand him and therefore I listened to him.

In that way it can be said that:

- We agreed on the fact that we did not understand each other and each other's plans and standpoints.
- We disagreed on what we each should have done and did but agreed on the fact that we each must have good reasons for doing so ... at any rate, agreed to a certain extent.

It can be difficult to have excess energy for all the decisions you have to address. It is also just as difficult to talk about it with each other, due to the fact you, as parents, find yourselves in a crisis. Perhaps, you are not even sure that this now is the right decision you are about to carry out. You can be confused, in doubt, unsure and all other possible things – apart from the grief you are most likely undergoing.

We made a point of separating things:

- We found it difficult to understand each other in our relationship and in relation to our wishes for each other.

That was the one part we needed to discuss.

- How should we tackle the whole situation concerning the break-up? How could we take care of Emil in the best possible way amid all the chaos?

That was the other part we needed to discuss.

The difficult feelings played a role when we spoke of our relationship, because, among other things, we could not understand each other.

But we understood each other and had a common goal when we spoke of how we should outline the best possible strategy for breaking up the family. In that way, we could, at least, focus together on the goal of taking care of Emil amid the chaos. So we were able to hold on to our parenthood, which we had in common – and which we would, of course, always have together.

So when we discussed the one part, we put the other part on hold and vice versa.

I think that, already at this point, we cemented the basis for the good cooperation that developed between us from then on. We held on to the area, where we had a common goal and good odds for success in reaching an agreement on what was best for our son.

We let the topics, where we did not have the same goal and where we did not understand each other, fill other conversations and at times when Emil was not present and later on in professional therapeutic conversations for couples.

In that way, we had room to disagree, to be angry, upset and so on, but we organised the timing of when we let these difficult emotions dominate.

We created two different forums:

- One where Emil was our main focus and where we did *not* talk about the subjects on which we disagreed.
- The other forum where we permitted ourselves to air our frustrations – without Emil being nearby.

We first began therapy for couples when I had moved. Emil's father had not been interested in therapy for couples when, before we split up, I originally suggested it. Now, when it was clear that our relationship hung by a thin thread, he suggested that we went in therapy for couples. I was for the idea but informed him that I did not necessarily have the same objective as he did; his being to save our relationship. However, I wanted, in any case, to invest more effort in ensuring we split up in the best possible way. I was convinced that talks with a third party could enhance the likelihood of that.

It can, indeed, be a good investment in having some talks with a third party, for example, a therapist for couples or a coach. It gives you the opportunity of gaining a better understanding of each other and of what has happened and is happening.



When we humans understand each other, there is far less risk of us being in conflict and at odds with each other.

Extract from Chapter 5

The choice of joint custody

I have felt many times that I should or ought to defend our choice of having our son live half of his time in his two homes – rather than him living permanently with one of us.

We did not choose to share our son between us out of consideration to ourselves but to Emil.

Focus Points

Carefully consider whether your child shall live with you both or have a permanent base at one of the places

Use perhaps the form at the back of the book (developed by Ottosen, Stage & Jensen³).

Consider how your child can handle change

It depends on quite a lot of factors but also particularly on the individual child's nature.

Siblings cannot always handle the same circumstances

Public administration can advise and make decisions on custody

Both, if you are unsure about what is best for your child or if you cannot agree about it.

Perhaps do something together with your child in the period when you are not living together

Go to the swimming baths, have a pizza or eat at the home of the child's other parent.

Be prepared to change the custody arrangement if your child shows a need for it

Perhaps for a period or in the long term.

Children can in solidarity to one of you come to devalue the custody with the other

Your child needs both of you as allies. Help the child out of its dilemma.

Do not ask your child to choose with which of you it shall live or be with most of the time

Extract from Chapter 6

Missing Mom and Dad

Most parents know how it is to be away from their child for a short period: When the child stays overnight for the first time with its grandparents, with a playmate or in connection with a holiday camp or an arrangement in the kindergarten. One thing is how the parents experience it – some parents find it difficult to be away from their child, while others rather enjoy having some adult time for a few days.

How it is experienced by the child is quite another thing – and that, by the way, is easily bound up with how the parents find the separation: When a child witnesses how difficult it is for the parents to leave it with others, for example, even when it is just being left off at the day nursery/kindergarten, the child notices it. The more reconciled the parents are at leaving their child in the care of others, the easier it is, as a rule, for the child also to be so.

As parents, we are concerned about how it has been for the child, while we have been apart – and it is quite relevant and how it should be. As a rule, we are quite relieved if the child has not missed us while we have not been there for the child. But, in connection with a divorce, it cannot be avoided that our children will miss us in those periods when we are not together with them.

So how do we as parents handle the fact that our child will miss us as a consequence of a family break-up?

When your child has come through the first difficult time when it no longer lives with you both, it will continue, at times, to be difficult for your child when it misses one of you. Some days your child will experience the yearning more than other days.

In the first couple of years after our family break-up, Emil was regularly upset and missed us. Since then it is more and more infrequent. Even today, when we, as parents, rarely witness that he misses us, there can be, now and then, times when he is upset and explains that he misses the other one. Right from that time when he was barely four years old until today, as a teenager, Emil has in periods and in some situations been over-sensitive and rather affected by the fact that he, no longer, has us both at the same time. Barely four years old, he managed to tell us when he could not bear his longing for us. Several times, he burst out crying and told us that he missed the other one. Both in the years after the break-up, the period following and to this day, I tell Emil that we had better ring to his father as I know that this helps him, even though it cannot disperse his longing just like that. But it is a comfort to Emil that he gets the opportunity to speak with his father.

In the early years after the break-up, I sometimes rang to Emil's father while Emil sat unhappily by my side. I asked whether Emil could go and stay with his father earlier, that is to say, the following day, even though that change should have taken place several days

later, according to our schedule. This did not lead to any disagreement between his father and me. We mutually expected that we could take the liberty in making such a request. As we both wanted to be flexible, we then could take care of Emil and his needs. It was a good way to ease some of our son's pain when his longing became unbearable.

So in Emil's presence, I rang his father and informed him that Emil was thinking of him and missed him and therefore was sad. While Emil still could hear the conversation, his father and I arranged that Emil could go home the following day to his father. Then father and son spoke together on the phone. Through the phone, some of Emil's longing was soothed by the sound of his father's voice and Emil was, at the same time, reassured by his father that he would collect him in the kindergarten the following day.

It was intentional that we refrained from handing over Emil on the actual day, when we changed the schedule on account of his longing. In that way, we avoided him being able to make use of our flexibility at some point when he, for example, had a conflict with the one he was living with at the time. Instead, Emil had confirmation of the fact that he did not have to wait several days before he went home to his father. This meant that, after the telephone conversation, he became happy again. He had the energy to be able "concentrate on his present state" for the rest of the day because now a solution for his longing had been found and a clear solution – because "*tomorrow, dad comes to collect me*".

Some children would not be able to handle such changes as these in the schedule. This concerns, among other things, children who are in special need of a regular framework. As parents, you surely know if you have a child that can handle spontaneous change in the original schedule.

It made Emil feel secure when we, as his parents, saw to changing the schedule together so that he could be permitted to see the parent he missed. Therefore, we rang each other up in his presence. I think that since then it has meant that Emil has not restrained from telling us when he misses the other parent. Right from the beginning, he has learnt that it is permitted to feel the longing and that we together with him attempt to take care of it.

Now that Emil is older – and when we have been to a school event that finishes in the evening – he has sometimes been sad when taking his leave. We have several times stood by our cars, about to say goodbye and drive off on our separate ways – Emil with one of us – when Emil has begun to cry. He has, in fact, managed to explain that he wanted to go home with the one, to whom he was to say goodbye. Every time we have taken his feelings and needs seriously and have in the situation changed the schedule. Every time, the result has been a change from a boy, ill at ease, to a relieved and calm boy who could smilingly wave goodbye to the parent with whom he originally should have gone home.

I know that many children of divorced parents are afraid to hurt their parents if in some situations they choose the one over the other. Emil was confident that it would not affect us negatively when he told us which one of us he was in need of. Otherwise he would not have

done it so openly. If, from the beginning, you show your child that is quite ok when it misses one of you, it will really help your child.

Some children, probably young children in particular, cannot, on top of it all, put their feelings into words or they feel uncomfortable and confused by these difficult feelings. There, it would be good if mom or dad helps out.

Mathias' mother and father no longer live together. Today, his father has collected him in the kindergarten and they have had a really pleasant day. Now Mathias has been put to bed and his father is lying beside him because Mathias cannot fall asleep. He lies looking up at the ceiling, turning from one side to the other and cannot settle at all. Mathias is thinking of his mother. He wonders what she is doing right now. Is she thinking of him and does she miss him, too? Mathias does not dare tell his father that because he might think that Mathias did not find it really good fun to play with all the animals today. Then his father might be upset and Mathias does not want that. He feels a stomach ache when he witnesses his mother upset and that has happened many times since his father and mother were divorced.

Mathias' father can certainly sense that Mathias is speculating over something and that there is something weighing on his mind. Mathias' father wonders how he can help his son in this situation but he feels quite helpless. What should he say? How can he begin? What if he makes Mathias quite sad? It does not bear thinking about it and he has, as father, already a really guilty conscience about Mathias suffering from the divorce.

Perhaps Mathias does not want to speak of it since he does not say anything. Therefore Mathias' father fails to ask at all about what Mathias is thinking or what is making it difficult for him to sleep.

Therefore, Mathias does not get it off his chest and tell why he is sad; nor does he learn that it is quite alright for him to miss his mother.

If you as parents sense that your child is missing and thinking of the other parent, then think to yourself; "*What is the worst thing that can happen if I delve into what my child is thinking about?*" The answer is most likely that your child will be sad.

I can provokingly ask; "*And what is wrong with that?*" for it is only natural that the child is sad and, more importantly, it is necessary that your child is allowed to be sad and show it – rather than bottle up such great and sad feelings. That is a lonely state of mind! Your child needs to express its thoughts and feelings and crying has a healing effect. It is part of the coming to terms with the whole difficult situation and you child is in need of comfort. At the same time, your child needs to find out that it is ok and natural to feel like that. It is best that your child learns that it is also acceptable to show what is troubling it and what is hard.

If Mathias' father had asked his son what he lay thinking about, Mathias would possibly have answered that it was his mother. Perhaps Mathias would then have been able to express what feelings were in play.

If Mathias could not answer, his father could help him along by saying something on the lines of: *"I have a feeling that you are thinking of your mother and I can understand that. Other children – who have been used to being together with their father and mother all the time – sometimes are sad when, for example, they have to sleep at night and do not have their mother nearby. Is that how you feel, Mathias?"*

If such a conversation meant that Mathias dared show he was sad, he could then be comforted by his father. From then on, it would be easier for Mathias to fall asleep and he would have come a small step further in coming to terms with his grief.

The need to be in Mom and Dad's thoughts

One evening I was eating an evening meal together with Emil. It was the first time he had been at his father's for five days in a row. Before that the change of homes had been more often so Emil and I had not before been so long apart.

During the meal, when Emil and I talked about what he had done at his father's, he asked in the middle of the conversation if I had thought of him. I replied that I had, of course, and at once realised how I had let my child down. I had not rung to him at all. I had no explanation for why I had not been in contact, although Emil did not ask me to explain. I just tried to reassure him that, during the course of a day, I thought of him many times, also when I was at work and when later the same day we were to be together when I collected him in the kindergarten.

I was aware of the fact that I had unconsciously failed to ring because I was afraid that both he and I would be upset. I felt I was not equipped to tackle the situation if he became upset in connection with a telephone call from me. I had come to protect mainly myself instead of thinking about the fact that my son had naturally a need to hear from his mother. Emil's heart-rending question that evening made it all the more clear that children have, of course, a need to be aware that they are in our thoughts – not just be told it.

In one of the children's books I read for Emil about a mother and father who no longer live together, it said that the boy's mother thought of him when he was with his father and that the boy's father thought of him when he was with his mother. This was a good reminder for me that children do not necessarily know this – on the same level as the situation where children do not necessarily know that it is not their fault that their parents have been divorced.

Some years after our family break-up, Emil, himself, brought up a couple of times his wish that his father and mother could live together. The last time was in a summer holiday when

it was way past bedtime so he was tired and missed his father. My former explanations that Emil's father and I still liked each other but not in a way so that we could live together, were not sufficient this time. Emil lay on his bed and cried. He kept on asking why we could not just live together so he did not have to miss any of us.

This evening nothing was right. He did not even want to ring to his father, even though it usually eased his longing.

Emil rejected everything I said, also my attempt to explain why his father and I could not move in together again. But he was also quite within his rights to do so for what use were my explanations to him when he just needed to have his parents together?

When I ran out of ideas of how I could help my son, who was so unhappy, I intuitively explained – without further consideration – that even though his father and I liked each other, we could not live together for we would not be happy any more. I briefly said that Emil was fine when we, as his parents, were fine. He took in that message without a word, even though, taking his age into consideration, it was rather abstract. He became calm and lay down to sleep.

Perhaps, it was not just my explanation that Emil accepted. Perhaps it was also about his acceptance of the fact that I made it clear that his father and I could not come to live together again. Being clear, when you explain to your child that you will not come to be together in the old family again, does *not* mean speaking harshly. Perhaps, in a firm tone but in such a way that it is clear that you understand and can take in your child's situation. Your child has, indeed, a right to be unhappy and frustrated and you must not come to "punish" your child for being like this. Your child, quite simply, needs your care, also in this situation.

When you, yourself, as a parent accept, believe, and dare stand by what you say, you become clear to your child. A clarity that gives your child peace. Your child can, indeed, tell that you know what is right for you both. It can help your child to come to terms with the circumstances.

But it can easily take some years before we, as parents, come to this point ...

A year or two after I had moved, Emil and the other children in the kindergarten were to draw themselves. One of the kindergarten teachers had followed Emil since the break-up and knew a little about my cooperation with Emil's father. She knew that we had considered, at length, just how Emil felt about the new family situation. She took me into the common room, where the children's drawings hung. She showed me Emil's self-portrait and demonstrated that we did not need to worry about how he was thriving. He had filled the large paper with his body and a large head with a smiling mouth.

It was a small and quick action on her part – and, at the same time, such a great and far-sighted action. As a newly-divorced parent, I had thought a lot about what my son's new circumstances would mean to him. Therefore, it meant a great deal to me to have such a

positive and reassuring message. In the following years, when I could feel a doubt as to how much the whole situation was ok for Emil, I often reminded myself of his self-portrait and what the kindergarten teacher had said.

Right after, I rang to Emil's father and shared the good experience with him, so he, too, could benefit from the positive feedback on our son's well-being.

Focus Points

The fact that your child misses you parents in turn cannot be avoided

Try to accept that such are the circumstances.

Ring to each other when the child is missing the other parent

Willingly change the custody arrangement when the child cannot bear the longing for the other parent

Then the child can go home earlier to the other parent, for example, the next day.

Be also open to sudden changes in the custody arrangement, for example, on the way home from a school party

A situation where you, as parents, adjust yourselves to what your child needs.

Listen and question your child – so you have a talk about the changed situation

It is natural that your child is unhappy.

If your child, itself, cannot express what is difficult, then help it to put into words:

"You find it difficult to fall asleep. Is it to do with your mother?"

You are walking on a tight-rope;

- when listening to your child's yearning for your ex-partner and dealing with this longing
- when preventing the child from going home to your ex-partner before time when the child is in conflict with you

Remind your child that you are thinking of it when you are not together

Never neglect your child's deprivation

Extract from Chapter 10

The child and the step parents (bonus parents)

Maria's ex-husband had, for some time, been together with a woman who was now beginning to see Maria's daughter, Olivia and Maria's husband.

Maria could barely take in hearing about that stupid woman who obviously thought she could just come in and play the role as mother for her daughter. As if it were not enough that she had taken over her husband. Who did she think she was? Olivia had a mother and it was no other than Maria! Therefore, it really hurt when Olivia spoke too positively, now and then, about her father's girlfriend. Once Maria simply had tears in her eyes when Olivia told her that her father's girlfriend was good at baking cakes so Olivia had been involved in the making of a cake in the shape of a house.

Maria could certainly hear that her daughter was proud of the house of cake but she was sick with jealousy over the fact that Olivia now had something special with her father's girlfriend. Something special that Maria was in no way part of. To top it all, Maria did not like baking. So now there was even more reason for Maria to see her husband's girlfriend as a rival.

Maria spoke of her frustration to her girlfriend, who thought that she, herself, would feel the same. But, at the same time, Maria's girlfriend said that it must, however, be nice for Maria to know that her daughter was well-treated by her father's girlfriend. After that, Maria, herself, thought that probably her ex-husband's girlfriend was in reality good enough and actually clever enough to know that she could not take over her role as mother.

But the logical and sensible way of thinking about it did not erase, as a matter of course, the hard feelings with which Maria had to struggle. It was really hard to have lost one's husband, one's family life, and now also in a way some of her daughter's affection. Maria felt her role as mother threatened.

Maria's girlfriend suggested that she had some counselling with a professional therapist so she could get help in tackling all the unpleasant feelings. Only with help from outside could Maria use her common sense to come to terms with the fact that it was actually good for Olivia that her father's girlfriend was good to her.

Your approach to new adults

I know that it can be really hard to tackle the situation when one's child is to meet a possibly future step parent (bonus parent). At the same time, I know – both professionally and personally, because I, too, am a bonus mother – how difficult it can be for some children to

spend time with a bonus parent. It becomes problematic when the child is unsure as to whether the biological parent is ok with the fact that a bonus parent has come on the scene.

The child can easily be worried about its mother or father and on many levels can be caught in the middle and be faced with dilemmas:

- ◊ *Is it ok for mom that dad is now fond of another woman?*
- ◊ *I wonder if my mother will be sad if I become fond of my father's girlfriend?*
- ◊ *I had better remember to reject dad's girlfriend now and then so I am being loyal to my mom.*
- ◊ *I wonder if my dad still loves me, for he is severe on me when I do not treat his girlfriend properly?*
- ◊ *I wonder if my dad's girlfriend really likes me? Because, on the one hand, she is really sweet to me, but I can feel that she has a lot to put up with when I reject her.*
- ◊ *I really do want to tell mom what we have done at dad's, but I must keep it to myself so that mom does not become sad from hearing anything about dad's girlfriend.*
- ◊ *I become sad when mom speaks in that way about my dad and his girlfriend, for she is actually ok. As it is my dad's girlfriend, then he will probably also be sad, if he knew that my mom does not like her.*

The many thoughts of a child, who faces all these dilemmas, weigh heavily and drain the child. For the child has to spend extra energy on closing down the shutters between its two lives at its father's and mother's in order not to say too much. Your child will become lonely if it does not have coherence in its life. Your child simply does not have the opportunity to share its enthusiasm with you. Many children protect their parents in order not to make them unhappy and at the same time protect themselves because it is unpleasant to witness their parents unhappy, angry, and irritated.

You risk your child having to spend a lot of energy on considering when it can say what, how enthusiastic it may sound and so on and so on. This energy is taken from your child's opportunity to learn, develop, and come through its own sorrow etc. In short, it affects your child's well-being.

If the fact that a step parent comes on the scene, is difficult for you, you can, perhaps, be better able to separate your feelings by turning your attention on all these circumstances:

- Partly what benefits your child best – then you try to act on that.
- Partly what benefits yourself best – that you, for example, find an outlet for all these difficult feelings.

Talk to friends, family, a therapist, coach or others. It can help you to encase these hard

feelings when you are with your child. Then what you say and what you do when you are with your child reflects to a lesser degree the negative feelings.

You can, also, try the positive approach by thinking that the step parent loves your child and therefore "your most precious possession" can only benefit from being with the other parent. Knowing that in itself must give peace of mind.

The step parent gets perhaps more time with your child than your own parents do. Surely, you would only see something positive in your child having a good relationship with its grandparents? In addition, it is about your child "having" to be together with the step parent. Then remember that it is an advantage if your child gets the opportunity of establishing a close bond with the step parent. Perhaps your child will, in future, have to spend half of its time together with that person. It can only be easier and more pleasant for your child if it has a good relationship with the person who will be such a great part of its everyday life.

When the child cares for its bonus parent

Already in the kindergarten, I remember a day when I collected Emil and he took a mat of beads down from his shelf. He told me that we were to remember to take the mat of beads home. When he stood with it in his hand, he changed his mind and said that Berit should have it and then he put the mat back.

He wanted to give his bonus mother a present and show her that she meant something to him. I did not feel I was set aside or given less priority because of it, just as I would not have done if he had said that one of his grandmothers was to have the mat of beads.

Extract from Chapter 16

Inform, coordinate, and find common ground in the child's two homes

When Emil's father and I separated, we had an extremely close cooperation; partly because we needed to follow up on how it was for Emil at the other's home when he moved between us and partly because of the frequent changes between us. It was also because of his age that an extra close cooperation was necessary to ensure coherence in his life. Our close cooperation was about the most important element concerning Emil, ensuring that we could support our son in this difficult period.

As a four year old, Emil's circumstances were such as follows:

- ◊ *How does he seem to be at the moment and how do we support him in the best possible way right now? In these days I have found that it helps when we read in books about other children of divorced parents. But, on the other hand, it was difficult for him when we had a playmate over.*
- ◊ *How is it going in the kindergarten now that his world has been so changed and tied up with loss and more? What should we possibly pay attention to in relation to that?*
- ◊ *How did his play date go? We visited grandmother and grandfather. (In this way we both could talk to him about what things of importance happened in his daily life as a child.)*
- ◊ *How did it go with having to do without his comforter at night?*
- ◊ *How did it go with the attempt to leave off the night nappy? Shall we change tactics?*
- ◊ *What does he leave in his lunch box at the moment? (So other food can replace it.)*
- ◊ *Who signs us up for the kindergarten event?*
- ◊ *What is he occupied with at the moment? For example, what subjects would he like to have his good-night stories about and what questions occupy him about the divorce at the moment?*
- ◊ *He has still problems with getting his hair washed. Does it help to count to 50 when he gets his hair rinsed?*

Here are some examples of what circumstances can be relevant for older children:

- ◊ *What is the outcome of the conflict at the football training? Has the disagreement between the boys been resolved so that he now wants to go to training?*
- ◊ *Has the fee for the cabin trip been handed over? Otherwise it is in the back part of the bag.*
- ◊ *Is it still a good idea to say to him an hour in advance that it is soon time for bed?*

- ◊ *Is he still not interested in doing his English homework and has sitting beside him been effective?*

We quickly found out that there are quite a lot of circumstances that are beneficial for the other parent to know.

Therefore we informed each other as much as possible so that we could, as far as possible, continue in the same way when we took over the custody from the other. In this way, we avoided having Emil to spend energy on adjusting to circumstances that we, as adults, could make sure to have under control. Information enabled us each to be abreast of developments and in that way, could create coherence in our child's life. Therefore we gave priority to sharing much information. Some of it we gave when we were together with Emil. This was often in three-quarters of the first year. Apart from that, we had close contact over the telephone so that we could pick up the thread where the other left off every time we took over custody.

Not all parents want this close cooperation and there can be many a good reason for that. At the same time, it is a balancing act, deciding how close a cooperation ought to be and can be in each case.

Sandra and Mads had recently separated. Sandra often rang to Mads to inform him even of small details. Mads was beginning to get tired of all the calls. Could Sandra not just get it into her head that they now lived their own lives? She could do what she wanted when she had their son, Markus. Mads wanted to be able to do as he pleased when he had the responsibility for Markus. Could Sandra not just trust him a little to find out how to take good care of his son?

When Sandra persuaded Mads to receive children's expert counselling in the Public administration auspices in order to have a better cooperation, Mads realised that Sandra's reports on the phone sometimes could benefit Markus. For example, when Mads got information from Sandra, it meant that he could avoid unfortunate situations with Markus.

On the other hand, Sandra now understood that she had to let go of some of the control she had had in relation to Markus' upbringing when they all three lived together.

Extract from Chapter 18

Do not let your child live a double-life

Flexibility and coordination are not enough ...

The main thread in the child's life, where there is coherence between the lifestyle in both homes, requires freedom for the child to speak openly about his parents, bonus parents and others.

That is to say that your child should preferably be able to talk about everyone in its "patchwork family", both in the original family and the newly acquired one.



Your child should be able to say anything about you all without care and consideration, anywhere, and at any time.

This gives your child the opportunity to be able to be itself and to let you parents and other important family members into its inner universe, where your child can reveal its immediate thoughts and share its experiences. The alternative is having to establish shutters between the way of life in its two families, so it would be a question of having a double-life.

Some children are, in fact, compelled to have shutters between the two homes: This happens when your child tries to avoid some of the adults being angry, sad, irritated etc. Children find out very quickly how good the parents and bonus parents feel about the things the child tells about. If the adults' bad feelings come out easily in the open, your child will make an effort not to say anything "wrong". The child does not want to say or do anything that opens the door to these difficult feelings for you parents and bonus parents – or perhaps even others in the family. So some children have to be on their guard and divide their life in two.

The first starting point in giving one's child the opportunity to talk about and speak positively about everyone in its family is where the child's family members speak to and about each other. In addition, you as parent proactively make sure you show your child that it is quite alright to tell you whatever it wants, also what is on its mind about the other parent and that part of the family.

In addition to speaking well of Emil's father, I have, since the divorce, made sure to speak of the qualities about Emil's father that I particularly appreciate, also to others when Emil hears it. Later, it also held good in relation to Emil's bonus mother and all of Emil's family on his father's side.

Extract from Chapter 19

Avoid a situation where your child plays off one parent against the other

Previously, in particular, Emil mentioned at rare intervals rules and circumstances which were different at home with his father and bonus mother. In these situations I remark that Emil's father and bonus mother have some good reasons and in that way show that I back up their judgement and decisions. At the same time I show my confidence in Emil's father and bonus mother of being well able to take care of Emil. That gives Emil a feeling of security and belief in the adults around him of being able to cooperate and back up his everyday life.

Frederikke lives with her mother, but she is also quite a lot of the time with her father and his partner, Katja.

One evening when Frederikke is sitting together with her mother and eating their evening meal, she thinks about the different rules at her parents' separate homes in relation to clearing up after the meal.

Frederikke's mother has said that it is important for Frederikke to learn all possible household tasks, for example, how to cook and clean up after the meal. Then she will not suddenly find herself as an adult, not knowing how to take care of herself when she has left home. Frederikke likes to help making food now and then and she also enjoys clearing up with her mother after the evening meal.

So perhaps her father does not think that it is so important for her to learn such adult tasks?

Frederikke says – slightly critical of her father – that it is strange that she does not have to help clearing up when she is there. "*I do not, after all, learn anything from that!*"

Frederikke's mother can clearly sense a criticism of her ex-husband in the way Frederikke expresses herself.

She answers her daughter:

"Dad has most likely decided that for some or other reason. Perhaps he has chosen not to involve you in the clearing up when you have eaten, because he really wants to have time together with you while Katja sees to the kitchen. After all, your father and you usually look at your homework together or continue reading one of the books he reads aloud for you in the meantime."

Continues ...

Dad knows, after all, that you are good at making food and everything else and you shall certainly manage to learn everything because you spend most of your time here.

Would you still prefer to clear up after the evening meal instead?"

No, Frederikke would not. She is glad to hear that her father is not irresponsible as she first thought. She had been confused by the fact that her mother thought one thing while her father another, regarding the household duties. But, in reality, they thought on the same lines – that Frederikke should have the opportunity to learn to take care of herself. Her mom obviously thought that the way it functions at her dad's is fine.

So Frederikke is also quite content; when both her mother and her father know what is going on at each other's homes and they both have confidence in each other's rules.

When the adults either speak together or back up each other's dispositions, the child is free from having to spend energy on playing off the one against the other. In the situations where Emil states something clearly suspicious, I say it sounds, on the face of it, strange. If he continues to stick to his statement, I tell him that I will just make sure to talk with his father and bonus mother about it. Most often it results in Emil himself being less categorical.

Young children in particular are rather categorical in their statements and opinions. I remember the following dialogue with Emil:

"We never have vegetables at dad's."

"Oh, that sounds a little strange for I know that dad and Berit have tried to serve you many different vegetables. Indeed, we always have vegetables when we are there for a meal."

"Yes, but we actually didn't get vegetables last week because ..."

Some times children say what they think the adult maybe needs to hear. If, in these situations, we adults are inattentive to the child's possible reasons for playing off the one parent against the other – or bonus parent – we risk that the child finds itself in a position where it actually does not want to be.

Make sure to be diplomatic and signal that you as parent do not disagree with the choices made by the other parent. Remember that often the child does not get all the nuances. It will give your child an enormous sense of peace and relief; it will surely show the child that it does not need to spend energy showing solidarity with one of you and that none of you want to form an alliance with your child. Deep down your child needs to have you both as allies because you both are the child's parents and both of importance, even though it is perhaps in two different ways.

Reference of the Purchasing Consultant for The Danish Library Center

Week 2013/49 (page 148 of 165)

Semlov, Camilla: : Det næstbedste: når far og mor ikke bor sammen (The next best thing: when dad and mom don't live together) / author: Camilla Semlov ; editor: Rikke Finland. – Indblik. – 236 pages. – DK 30.1752

Application/ target group/ level

A combined handbook and personal account of succeeding in cooperation concerning the children when mom and dad split up. A useful, inspiring perusal for divorced parents (and step parents). Easily read, constructive and empathic sharing of experience, avoid of legal and technical terms.

Description

The author is a family counselor, divorced from her child's father and both partners are now in new relationships. Her personal story fills most of the book that gives good advice and instructions as how to behave in the best possible way in relation to the ex-partner, the new step-parents and, not least, the children. Professionalism, empathically communicated, check lists as well as a questionnaire can aid the reader towards constructive relations to an ex and in avoiding more harm done to the child than is absolutely necessary.

Conclusion

An easily read sharing of experience by a professional, whose personal divorce account is the mainstay of the book. Divorced parents are advised as how to help the child as leniently as possible through the break-up and as how to handle problems such as jealousy, sorrow, relations to step-parents and step-siblings. Realistic handbook that honestly meets the reader at his/her level with empathy and good tools to handle a break-up.

Annemette Schønberg Johnsen

Book Review of

Det næstebedste – når far og mor ikke bor sammen. (The next best thing – when dad and mom don't live together.)

Det næstebedste – når far og mor ikke bor sammen. (The next best thing – when dad and mom don't live together.)

By Camilla Semlov – Publishing house INDBLIK ISBN 978-87-93068-22-3

Camilla, an experienced social worker and family counselor has written this book in the light of all the things she should have liked to have known when she was divorced in 2004.

Camilla's starting point is very actual and the governing idea is the child in the center as well as the fact that the next best thing, when mom and dad cannot have the happy nuclear family, can be really good – AND, at any rate, much better than being in a nuclear family where the adults really do not want to be.

The book describes really well the field between mother, father and step-family members, where it is difficult to ask people (read here: step-relations) to take responsibility and then at a later point in time not wish to share that responsibility in a certain situation. It is one of the difficult situations to resolve in our new family forms. This area is described by Camilla with an insight that shows she has pocketed many an insult for the sake of solidarity and she has done it in order to give her child a fine and coherent life within the new family constellations that have arisen after the parents' break-up.

"Det næstebedste – når far og mor ikke bor sammen" (The next best thing – when dad and mom don't live together) is full of personal experiences and lots of good advice. This book should be obligatory for all parents who no longer live together.

A few of the many good pieces of advice in the book:

- Time with your child is not your time, it is the CHILD's time.
- Be open to an idea even though at the beginning you are opposed to it. It encourages good cooperation.
- Our well-being as parents rubs off on our children's well-being.
- It is difficult to listen if one is sure that one is right.

Reviewed by Administrative Director Helle Laursen Petersen, delebarn.dk

Bogvægten (The Book Emphasis)

Professional literature

Camilla Semlov

Det næstbedste – når far og mor ikke bor sammen (The next best thing – when dad and mom don't live together)

236 pages

Publisher: Indblik

Published: 2013

The losers in divorces are often children but there is help at hand. Social worker and family counselor, Camilla Semlov describes in her book how parents, in spite of hurt feelings and rearranged lives, can create a good environment for the young ones.

With her own divorce and a four year old son as starting point, the author goes through the many aspects there are in building a new and different daily life for herself and, in particular, her child. Semlov emphasizes the importance of the parents agreeing to all the circumstances in connection with the child, also if they are, perhaps, in a phase, where they have difficulty communicating with each other. Furthermore, it is imperative that the partners speak respectfully of each other in front of the child.

The author makes a great effort in explaining what divorce means to the child and how one can best keep the child's world intact, whether the ideal situation is joint custody and, if this is the case, what is required of the communication between the homes.

Another aspect is when the divorced parents enter a new relationship. How is this done tactfully out of respect for the former partner, when and how can one present a new partner to the child? Here the author herself can recount such a successful adjustment of the two new step-parents that the son has no less than four parents along to Parents' Day at school and it results in an overwhelming situation for those around them, when the child presents four parents.

Consideration for the child is constantly emphasized and there are excellent and tested suggestions as to how this consideration can be maintained. The book is rather detailed but the fact that the author concurrently tells of her own experiences makes a strong impact.

Birte Strandby