Co-Parenting Education: Use of Paired/Small Group Conversations

Submitted by Patti Herman

You might have had this experience: You’ve got great content planned for your co-parenting education class and have done your usual great job of sharing the content and asking the group for questions/thoughts….and you can’t seem to get any response. What’s a facilitator to do?

I’ve found that using paired discussions (having participants talk to the person next to them) is a great way to get people talking….in fact, it’s often hard to reconvene the large group once they get talking to one another! This strategy can help people feel more comfortable in the group, especially during the early part of the class. Parents come to my class a little uncertain about what to expect and they may be a bit reluctant to share their thoughts or experiences with the group. Talking to just one other person (rather than the larger group) can be a great way to ease this discomfort.

After the paired experience I invite (encourage) them to share some of what they shared with the other person. I usually get at least a few that are willing to share with the larger group and the comfort level in the group seems to rise as they start to realize that there are others who are having similar experiences. In fact, on the end-of-class feedback forms people often comment that it was great to hear from other parents and realize they’re not the only one going through this.

If your classes are large you may find it works better to break people into small groups rather than pairs. You’ll decide whether you want to re-pair/re-group people each time you use this strategy during the class; there are pros and cons to each approach. For example, keeping the same pairs/groupings could be problematic if there are two people who just don’t relate well and it also limits the number of different interactions. On the plus side, keeping people with the same person(s) gives them a chance to get to know that person better and may contribute to a deeper level of communication and understanding.

True confession time: It wasn’t until a few years into teaching the class that I started using paired discussion as one of my strategies. I’m not sure why it took me so long. Maybe I was afraid that this might take the class away from my educational focus and allow it to stray toward a therapy approach. (I’m always very clear at the beginning that this is NOT therapy, it’s education.) Or maybe I was “protecting” the participants from having to share personal information. (Hmmm…a little self-projection, perhaps?) In any event, it’s now a regular strategy within my program.

Here are a few examples of how I might use paired/small group discussions in my co-parenting class.

* We talk about children’s developmental considerations that parents need to keep in mind during divorce and I ask each person to look at the pages from the Parenting Forever book that relates to the ages of their children. I ask them to talk with the person next to them about whether they’ve seen any of the listed behaviors in their children and how they could respond in ways that would be supportive of their children.
* We talk about things that can affect a child’s adjustment to divorce (in addition to developmental considerations) and make a list on a flip chart. (For example, parental conflict, loss of important relationships, temperament of the child, and other things noted in the Parents Forever book.) As we list each one we also talk about things that parents can do to support children’s adjustment relative to that factor. I then ask participants to talk to the person next to them about factors that have affected their children’s adjustment and how they could respond in ways that would be supportive of their children.
* We use the “Games Parents Play” segment from the Parents Forever dvd. I show each segment and then stop after each so we can talk about what participants saw in that segment and how things could have been done differently to avoid playing this game (and putting children in the middle). I then ask participants to talk to the person next to them about whether they’ve seen any of these games (or other games) in their own situation and what they can do differently if a game is happening.