

# The Responsibility Pyramid

Taken from: *Joint Custody With a Jerk* by Ross and Corcoran, 1996

## *The Flip Side of the Coin—Taking Too Much Responsibility*

Once you understand that taking responsibility for your choices gives you control, and you accept that the choices you've made have consequences, you'll be able to make better choices in the future. In addition, learning to phrase your communication without blaming, avoiding, or denying responsibility allows you to begin to identify situations in which you are responsible and distinguish them from the situations in which you aren't responsible.

Because taking responsibility gives you control, there is a temptation to take on too much responsibility. Many people believe that they have to fix everything and everyone, because if they don't, no one else will. These people often take on responsibilities that don't belong to them, such as responsibility for someone else's feelings or problems. The person who takes too much responsibility often feels overwhelmed and unappreciated, while the person who takes too little responsibility feels controlled and suffocated. When this happens, it complicates situations so vastly that it's difficult even to begin working out a solution to the problem.

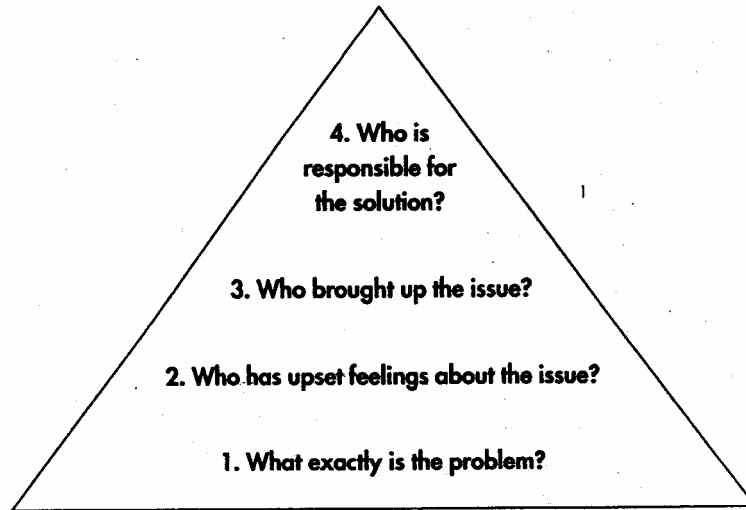
## *The Problem Pyramid*

People often spend a great deal of time spinning their wheels, trying to solve problems that don't belong to them. For example, when a child feels afraid at night because he thinks there are "monsters" under the bed, many parents set out to solve that problem. They say things like, "Well, let's look under the bed, then you'll see there are no monsters," or they invent a special "monster spray" and go to great lengths to spray the room so the monsters will leave. But do the "monsters" go away? Not likely. The difficulty lies in to whom the problem belongs.

A "monster" under the bed is not the parent's problem; it's the child's. And because the problem belongs to the child, the solution for solving the problem also belongs to the child. We're not suggesting that you abandon a frightened child, but rather that you use supportive techniques that empower your child to come up with a solution himself. (These techniques are described in Chapter Seven, "When Your Child Tops the Problem Pyramid.")

If you fail to recognize that problems like these belong to your child, you will spend a great deal of time, energy, and frustration trying valiantly to help by taking the problem on yourself. Figuring out to whom a problem belongs in a particular situation does not permit you to wash your hands of it, blame someone else, or rush in and save the day, but rather allows you to decide which course of action to take.

The problem pyramid below will help you sort out who really needs to be taking responsibility for solving a particular problem. Once you know who is responsible, you can decide the most effective way to promote a solution. Read the pyramid from bottom to top:



Now let's break it down and discover how this simple formula can enable you to effectively solve a problem like this one: Your ex barges into your home without knocking when she picks up your child.

1. What exactly is the problem? By looking at your feelings and identifying your thoughts in the Think-Feel-Do cycle, you can break a big problem down into its individual components and look at them separately.

Your thoughts in the case of the ex who barges in may be that your ex doesn't live here anymore and has no right to just walk in. You may feel exposed and intruded upon.

2. Who has upset feelings? List all parties whose feelings are upset. Note that we don't say all parties who have feelings about the issue. This level is specifically for negative feelings. Because more than one name can go on this level, it's important to look at the next level. If you stop here, you may take on a problem that doesn't really belong to you.

When your ex barges in, you have upset feelings. Your ex is perfectly content barging in on you.

3. Who brought up the issue? Sometimes it is difficult to decide who brought up the issue because it can seem as though two or more people have issues simultaneously. Also, because you're the one who is working through the problem pyramid and who is focused on a solution to the problem, it sometimes seems as though you're always the only one raising an issue. Keep in mind that only one person can bring up an issue at a time, and it's usually (though not always) the person who verbalized it first

When your ex is happily barging in, she won't bring this up to you because it's not an issue to her. *You* have an issue with it

4. Who is responsible for the solution? It is the combination of levels 2 and 3 that determines who is responsible for implementing a solution to the problem. If you have upset feelings and you're also bringing the issue up as a problem, then your name will appear on level 4. Conversely, if your ex has upset feelings and has brought up the issue (whether or not she believes it is a problem) ,then your ex's name belongs on level 4. It is also possible that your child may have upset feelings and be bringing up the issue, and then his or her name will appear on level 4 of the problem pyramid.

It's unlikely that the names on levels 2 and 3 will be different, because people who are content with a situation rarely bring it up as an issue (like the ex who barges in). It is, however, theoretically possible to have different names on these levels. In this case, level 3 alone determines who tops the problem pyramid.

It's important to note that the person whose name appears on level 4 will not necessarily be motivated to find a solution to the problem himself. But *your* next action will be directed by the name that appears here. If your name appears here, you'll use the techniques in Chapter Four, "When You Top the Problem Pyramid." If your ex's name appears here, you'll use the techniques in Chapter Nine, "When Your Ex Tops the Problem Pyramid." And if your child's name appears here, you'll go to Chapter 7 when your child tops the pyramid.

## **When *You* Top The Pyramid**

Cited from: "Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising a Child with an Uncooperative Ex"  
by Julie Ross and Judy Corcoran, 1996.

1. Pick your battles --some may be easier for you to handle.
2. Set yourself up for success.
3. Plan of action.
4. When and where to speak to your Ex.

5. Neutral Territory (not old home/office)
  6. Reframe your relationship—Business.
  7. What do you want from your Ex, and what are the consequences?
  8. Formula:
    1. When you are late picking up son.
    2. I feel frustrated.
    3. Because it makes me late for my plans.
    4. I would like you to please pick him up on time.
  9. Positive Action Statement: When you say, “don't do this, Stop doing that...”
 

You expect them to do the wrong thing.

Tune out, fail to hear anything after the “*don 't*”.

Instead of “Don't be late”—“Please be on time.”
  10. "I" messages –for both genders because men and women communicate differently.
    - Formulate message for a man: "I would like you to use more respectful language in my presence. When you swear at me, I feel angry because it is degrading."
    - For women: "I feel angry when you swear at me because it is degrading. I would like you to please use more respectful language in my presence."
- [Remember] Men – Action first; Women – Feeling first.

Why "I" messages work:

1. Not become defensive, non-threatening and inherently respectful.
  2. Able to remain calm (memorize formula).
11. Never use "always" and "never" -inflames listener, deal with each situation as if it is excluded from others.
  12. Make "I" messages optimally effective--look behind the strong harsh feelings and determine if masking a subtler emotion.
  13. Practice your messages.
  14. "I" messages meet resistance, Ex may have stoked response--Ex puts up a brick wall. Use metaphor, rephrase in arena familiar to partner. Ex not giving you attention, answering phones -you're a coach of a basketball team and one of your players shoots baskets while you talk. Also, Ex doesn't give 'bleep' how you feel -Knowing what you

want ahead of time and repeating "I understand that. I hear it in your voice." –Repeat: "I'd like you to \_\_\_\_\_." If it continues –disengage—cool down.

15. Get In and Get Out: Plan ahead of time for getting out --"I only have a few minutes" "Somebody is at the door and I have to go." Once excuse is given, pull out appointment book and schedule another time to talk.

16. The Consequences:

Setting clear limits by giving choices: either/or.

Mean what you say, it has to be something you are comfortable with.

Don't give empty threats.

Brainstorm for ideas.

Avoid All-or-Nothing traps -need to see shades of gray.

17. Taking it Slowly --still meet with resistance instead of "If I don't get my point across now, I'll never get it across" -"There's a lot at stake here and I'm going to make him see that".

18. Asking Questions--Ex feels that you're interested in what he *or* she has to say. "Tell me more about what you are looking for." "How do you think we can work this out?"

19. Repetition.

20. Role-play.

## **When *Your Ex* Tops The Pyramid**

Cited from: "Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising a Child with an Uncooperative Ex"  
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*Kids can survive divorce and most other family crises if they have: a supportive home environment, a sense of structure in their lives, and a genuine caring from at least one parent.*

1. Load lifted from your shoulders. It's not your responsibility so you don't have to think of solutions.

2. Don't be pressured into acting too quickly.

- If you are feeling pressured while talking on the phone say: "Give me a few minutes", "I'll call you right back" or "Hold the line". "If you need an answer right now, it will have to be 'no'. If you can give me some time to think about it, I may be able to."

- You should always check with your partner first before you change any plans.

Remember: the "Policy of Joint Agreement".

- Stampeded: It's rarely to your advantage to act quickly; and usually it is to your advantage to wait. If you get a sudden request (stampeded), find a way to take a few minutes to collect your thoughts to avoid being "caught off guard or "off balance". *Note: when you are off balance, you are a push over.* When feeling pressured say: "I'm glad to hear your side of it. Now I need to think that through and then make my decision", or "I know you want the answer right now but it would be unfair to all of us if I didn't think it through. I'll get back to you in an hour."

3. Recognize when you are being dumped on--when another person assumes that you'll take on the problem, provides him/her with the leverage and makes *you* more likely to do just that.

4. Listening: Begin the process of listening. Listening helps to calm people down. It centres them. Reflect back to them what you're hearing of their position—Sometimes requires getting off the phone, taking time to collect thoughts and bringing down your own defenses. Then reframe the question and call your Ex back.

5. Use empathy: -**Act** (not necessarily be) empathetic. Let them know you understand the issue/difficulty they are facing (because if they feel you don't understand and you are refusing

their problem, escalation is likely). Avoid escalation to anger (which is likely to produce a stalemate). Say: "I hear you." or "That's difficult." or "Gee, that does sound like a problem."

6. Empowering your Ex: Turn the table so that she/he will think of ways to solve his/her own problems.

\*Very important to know your boundaries and limits. Turn the problem back to the problem's owner. "I'm sorry I can't help you out this time. What other plans do you think might work?" "How are you going to handle that?"

7. Standing your ground --say "No" to a problem and stick to it. "No, I am sorry, I can't do that."

8. Do unto others --treat your Ex in a respectful way.

9. Watch your tone of voice.

10. When problem is so big that you need legal or professional help (Ex *continually harasses* you, *continually* misses support payments).

**SUMMARY:** When your Ex tops the problem pyramid:

- The important aspect is how you go about getting him/her to address the problem.
- You don't have to accept responsibility for the problem.
- Ask them, what alternate plans they had in place, or give the problem back to them to solve.
- Extract yourself.

**The Benefit:** a load is lifted from your shoulders.

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