

Co-Parenting Tips for Divorced Parents

Making Joint Custody Work After a Separation or Divorce

Co-parenting amicably with your ex can give your children stability and close relationships with both parents—but it's rarely easy. Putting aside relationship issues to co-parent agreeably can be fraught with stress. Despite the many challenges, though, it is possible to develop a cordial working relationship with your ex for the sake of your children. With these tips, you can remain calm, stay consistent, and avoid or resolve conflict with your ex and make joint custody work.

Co-parenting after a separation or divorce

Joint custody arrangements, especially after an acrimonious split, can be exhausting and infuriating. It can be extremely difficult to get past the painful history you may have with your ex and overcome any built-up resentment. Making shared decisions, interacting with each another at drop-offs, or just speaking to a person you'd rather forget all about can seem like impossible tasks. But while it's true that co-parenting isn't an easy solution, it is the best way to ensure your children's needs are met and they are able to retain close relationships with both parents.

It may be helpful to start thinking of your relationship with your ex as a completely new one—one that is entirely about the well-being of your children, and not about either of you. Your marriage may be over, but your family is not; doing what is best for your kids is your most important priority. The first step to being a mature, responsible co-parent is to always put your children's needs ahead of your own.

Co-parenting can be the best option for your child:

Through your parenting partnership, your kids should recognize that they are more important than the conflict that ended the marriage—and understand that your love for them will prevail despite changing circumstances. Kids whose divorced parents have a cooperative relationship:

Feel secure. When confident of the love of both parents, kids adjust more quickly and easily to divorce and have better self-esteem.

Benefit from consistency. Co-parenting fosters similar rules, discipline, and rewards between households, so children know what to expect, and what's expected of them.

Better understand problem solving. Children who see their parents continuing to work together are more likely to learn how to effectively and peacefully solve problems themselves.

Have a healthy example to follow. By cooperating with the other parent, you are establishing a life pattern your children can carry into the future.

Co-parenting tips for divorced parents: Setting hurt and anger aside

The key to co-parenting is to focus on your children—and your children only. Yes, this can be very difficult. It means that your own emotions—any anger, resentment, or hurt—must take a back seat to the needs of your children. Admittedly, setting aside such strong feelings may be the hardest part of learning to work cooperatively with your ex, but it's also perhaps the most vital. Co-parenting is not about your feelings, or those of your ex-spouse, but rather about your child's happiness, stability, and future well-being.

Separating feelings from behavior

It's okay to be hurt and angry, but your feelings don't have to dictate your behavior. Instead, let what's best for your kids—you working cooperatively with the other parent—motivate your actions.

- **Get your feelings out somewhere else.** Never vent to your child. Friends, therapists, or even a loving pet can all make good listeners when you need to get negative feelings off your chest. Exercise can also be a healthy outlet for letting off steam.
- **Stay kid-focused.** If you feel angry or resentful, try to remember why you need to act with purpose and grace: your child's best interests are at stake. If your anger feels overwhelming, looking at a photograph of your child may help you calm down.
- **Use your body.** Consciously putting your shoulders down, breathing evenly and deeply, and standing erect can keep you distracted from your anger, and can have a relaxing effect.

Children in the middle

You may never completely lose all of your resentment or bitterness about your break up, but what you can do is compartmentalize those feelings and remind yourself that they are your issues, not your child's. Resolve to keep your issues with your ex away from your children.

- **Never use kids as messengers.** When you have your child tell the other parent something for you, it puts him or her in the center of your conflict. The goal is to keep your child out of your relationship issues, so call or email your ex yourself.
- **Keep your issues to yourself.** Never say negative things about your ex to your children, or make them feel like they have to choose. Your child has a right to a relationship with his or her other parent that is free of your influence.

Co-parenting tips for divorced parents: Parenting as a team

Parenting is full of decisions you'll have to make with your ex, whether you like each another or not. Cooperating and communicating without blow-ups or bickering makes decision-making far

easier on everybody. If you shoot for consistency, geniality, and teamwork with your ex, the details of child-rearing decisions tend to fall into place.

Aim for consistency

It's healthy for children to be exposed to different perspectives and to learn to be flexible, but they also need to know they're living under the same basic set of expectations at each home. Aiming for consistency between your home and your ex's avoids confusion for your children.

- **Rules.** Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but if you and your ex-spouse establish generally consistent guidelines, your kids won't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments. Important lifestyle rules like homework issues, curfews, and off-limit activities should be followed in both households.
- **Discipline.** Try to follow similar systems of consequences for broken rules, even if the infraction didn't happen under your roof. So, if your kids have lost TV privileges while at your ex's house, follow through with the restriction. The same can be done for rewarding good behavior.
- **Schedule.** Where you can, aim for some consistency in your children's schedules. Making meals, homework, and bedtimes similar can go a long way toward your child's adjustment to having two homes.

Dealing with visitation refusal

Sometimes kids refuse to leave one parent to be with the other. Although this can be a difficult situation, it is also common for children in joint custody.

Find the cause. The problem may be one that is easy to resolve, like paying more attention to your child, making a change in discipline style, or having more toys or other entertainment. Or it may be that an emotional reason is at hand, such as conflict or misunderstanding. Talk to your child about his or her refusal.

Go with the flow. Whether you have detected the reason for the refusal or not, try to give your child the space and time that he or she obviously needs. It may have nothing to do with you at all. And take heart: most cases of visitation refusal are temporary.

Talk to your ex. A heart-to-heart with your ex about the refusal may be challenging and emotional, but can help you figure out what the problem is. Try to be sensitive and understanding to your ex as you discuss this touchy subject.