

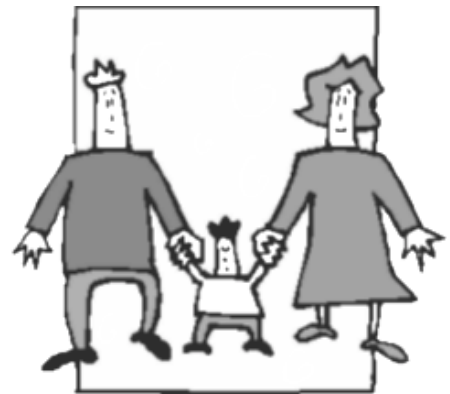


Single Parenting: Co-Parenting after Divorce

Do I want to co-parent?

After divorce, the role of spouse ends, yet the role of parent continues. You may find it helpful to stop and think about the following questions:

- How involved do I want to be in my child's life?
- Do I get along with my former spouse enough to be able to work through parenting issues?
- How do I manage parenting if my former spouse and I can't get along?



Co-parenting means that both parents play an active role in their children's day to day lives. The key to the success of co-parenting arrangements is how well the parents function. What works best for some single parents may not work well for others.

Talk with other single parents for ideas. Then decide on the best parenting arrangement for you, your former spouse and your children. Co-parenting will not work if there is a history of addiction, family violence or other circumstance that would limit a parent's functioning. Studies show that some benefits of co-parenting include:

- Both parents and children can learn effective ways to communicate.
- Both parents recognize and respond to their children's needs.
- Children develop feelings of stability.
- Children continue relationships with both parents.
- Children are less likely to feel divided loyalties, abandoned, or that they have to meet the social and emotional needs of their parents.

In every separation or divorce, parents need to recognize the importance of finishing what they started—raising their children. If it's possible, children benefit when they have relationships with both parents. Separation and divorce are difficult times for most children. Still, they tend to adjust to divorce smoothly when they have a good relationship with both parents, when both parents respond to the needs of their children and when parents do not argue, especially when their children are present.

What may be included in a co-parenting arrangement?

Parents must decide what aspects of parenting to share. This often depends on custody arrangements and the ability to discuss issues with a former spouse without conflict and in a businesslike way. Think about:

- What decisions need to be made
- How you will make the decisions
- How and when you will talk to your ex-spouse
- How you will arrange and share schedules
- Who will arrange care giving when neither parent is available
- How you will handle discipline
- What will happen in an emergency

Co-parenting decisions

This list will help you think about the decisions you and your former spouse may need to make. Who will be responsible for which decisions? You? Your former spouse? Will you make the decision together?

Food the children will eat	Television: which shows, how much time
Eating habits, meals	Computer: Internet use, which video games
Clothing children will wear	Religion
Where children will live	Morals, values
Schools children will attend	Discipline
Contacts with teachers	Handling behavior problems
Toys and entertainment	Allowances
Children's grooming	Health issues:
Friends of children	Doctor visits
Overnight visits with friends	Dentist visits
Dating	Medication
Bedtimes	Psychological counseling
Childcare/babysitting	Other issues

Keep in mind

Problems may develop if parents send messages to each other through their children. Problems also arise when a parent talks badly about the other parent. Children may feel guilty and unsure of their parent's love when they're caught in the middle.

If a parent asks about a former spouse, children may report that things are fine, even if they're not. Or children may say things to make the parent feel guilty. Again, don't use your children by putting them in the middle.

Parents often disagree on how to discipline their children. When mothers and fathers have different rules, children may not respect either set of limits. Or they may use the differences to gain power over parents. For example, a mother may change a curfew when her daughter says, "Daddy lets me stay out until midnight." It's important to have clear rules and boundaries in your household. Try not to feel guilty if your rules are different than those of your ex-partner.

If you are comfortable with the rules you have set, stick with them. When it seems you and your former-spouse can't agree on certain issues, it helps to restate common goals. For example say things such as, "We both want to find a solution to this problem." "We're both concerned." "We share the same goal. Let's try to talk about this some more."

After you have discussed discipline and the responsibilities outlined on the form above, it's important to set a date to look at adjusting the agreement. Changes in life may affect how you juggle responsibilities. One good time to review the shared parenting form is when a child starts a new grade in school.

Helping children adjust

Children can adjust to a variety of living patterns, including living in two homes. How well children adjust depends on whether parents can minimize their conflicts, stop arguing and focus on their children's needs. When parents can't agree, tell the children that there will be separate rules in each home. It may be frustrating, but it's important to remember that your children need you to be a strong, positive influence in their lives. Here are some things you can try:

- Focus on my children's healthy development.
- Accept my children's feelings.
- Avoid passing messages to my ex-partner through my children.
- Avoid making negative comments about my ex-partner in front of my children.
- Try to arrange my life so my children will continue to attend their school and to play with their friends.
- Follow the co-parenting form. Jointly evaluate the form with my ex-partner at least once every year and make needed changes.
- Avoid weekend parenting if possible. Both parents should be responsible for raising children, not merely entertaining them.
- Try not to compete for my children's love and attention, for example by buying them toys or taking them on fancy vacations.
- Help my children remain connected to me, their other parent when they are with me, and with my relatives, through letters, e-mails and phone calls.
- Make sure school personnel notify both households.
- Try to provide consistency in rule-setting. If this isn't possible, I will help my children understand that rules must be obeyed in each household, just as different rules are obeyed at day care or school and at home.
- Try to make the transition from one home to the other as easy as possible for my children.
- Not show unhappiness or anger.
- Talk to my children about their feelings if they want to talk.
- Set up a ritual if this will help them make the transition. For example, we may stop for a snack on the way to the other household or go to the playground and talk awhile.

When parents disagree

What should I do when a former spouse manipulates, is over-controlling or won't let go?

When you hold strong disagreements, it may be time to re-think the child custody arrangement and the ways you communicate with your former spouse. Most single parents have disagreements with their former spouses or partners. Everyone needs to learn to handle parenting differences.

Accept that there may be differences with parenting issues. Work on finding common ground only on the important issues. Mark five of the following suggestions you will try.

- When a conflict occurs, I will remind my ex-partner that we have the same goal. For example, we both want the very best for our children, or we want our children to be happy and healthy.
- I will find a neutral adult to carry messages to my former partner.
- I will talk to a counselor, pastor or divorce mediator to help me build a workable parenting arrangement.
- I will discuss parenting issues when the children are not around.
- I will talk over the phone or write e-mails if face-to-face conversations with my former spouse end in conflicts.
- I will follow the visitation schedule, but be flexible.

- When transferring my children from one household to the other, I will avoid discussing important issues
- I will keep conversations businesslike by discussing only issues related to the children.
- I will keep personal information to myself.
- I will focus on what I can control rather than trying to change my ex-partner.
- I will avoid making unreasonable demands on my former partner.
- If my former partner and I differ about rules or discipline, I will use reasons to explain my point of view. For example, “To improve the children’s school performance, I want bedtime to be 8:00 p.m. rather than 9:00 p.m.”
- When communicating with my ex-partner, I won’t preach, use the “I’m better than you” tone of voice, or expect him/her to respond immediately.
- I will learn to manage conflict, negotiate or compromise.
- When my former partner picks up or drops off the children, I will watch my entrance and exit lines. I won’t make negative statements such as, “You could have at least given him a bath.” or “Can’t you ever be on time?”
- I will consult an attorney if I think the current parenting arrangement may be harmful to my children. For example, if my former partner is drinking, using drugs or neglecting or abusing the children, I will talk to my lawyer.
- I will teach my children how to get help if I think they may be in a dangerous situation at some time. For example, my former partner may neglect them if he/she is drinking.
- I will learn what community resources are available to help me be a warm, nurturing and responsible parent.

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