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# Managing Relationships with Your Child's Other Parent

Divorce is a painful experience. Afterwards, adults may want to forget the past and make a fresh start. When children are involved, former spouses can't avoid seeing each other. Rather than forget the past, adults need to allow themselves to experience all the feelings that come with a deep loss. Anger, guilt and grief are natural parts of mourning a lost marriage.



Allowing feelings to surface, in a constructive manner, can often help adults cope with them and move on. If former spouses don't cope with their negative feelings, their relationships may remain tense for years. Strained relations between their divorced parents can be especially painful for children. They can sense hostility between their parents. They may feel stuck in the middle of arguments over child-support, child-contact schedules or child-rearing practices.

Focusing on their children's wellbeing can help former spouses find common ground. Researchers found that unless domestic violence or child abuse has occurred, children generally have a better adjustment to divorce when they keep contact with both biological parents. It can be hard for former spouses to share children, but the benefits generally outweigh the difficulties.

Children should be free to express their good feelings about both biological parents and stepfamilies. Parents often have to work hard at controlling their negative feelings. They must try not to complain about former spouses in front of children.

Parents can help their children adjust to new living arrangements by understanding what they are going through. The "co-parenting" relationship will affect children, as will living in two households.

## **Co-parenting (cooperative parenting)**

Former spouses will need to work out arrangements that work the best for them. Some separated and divorced couples co-parent cooperatively. They remain friendly enough to discuss different aspects of parenting. Children will feel less confused when parents can work out agreements about details such as bedtimes or household rules.

## **Parallel parenting**

However, after divorce most people still have conflicts between them. They may find trying to agree on issues such as bedtimes or curfews leads to arguments. This doesn't help them or their children. These parents can develop a "parallel parenting" arrangement. In this case, parents make decisions only for their own households.



When relationships are tense, many former spouses find it more comfortable to keep their conversations business-like. They only discuss the children, not other aspects of their lives.

They discuss disagreements over their children when the children aren't around. Having disagreements doesn't mean that either parent is a failure; married couples disagree—so do divorced parents. Even parents who have different rules and styles, however, can both be first-rate parents.

Whether they choose to have a lot of contact or a little, former spouses should always communicate directly. Problems arise when adults ask children to be messengers. For example, a father who says, "Tell your mother she'll have to drop you off early next week," places his child right in the middle.

The child may accidentally convey the wrong message. Or he or she may get caught in an argument. If this change in plans makes the mother angry, the child may believe, "If it weren't for me they wouldn't be fighting." When caught between hostile parents, children often feel guilty and unsure of their parents' love.

Adults should work out all the arrangements for young children. If asked to decide about when they "want" to see their parents, young children may feel pressured to choose one parent over the other.

A child may not want to spend time with one parent fearing that the other will be lonely. By closely following the predetermined child-contact schedule, parents will be saying, "It's okay for you to go."

Parents can ask older children to share their opinions about when they will spend time with their parents. Discussing plans with a child before working out the details with the other household is a good idea. Even though the adults make the arrangements, the child will have a chance to state what he or she wants.

## **Tips for co-parenting**

- The state of New Hampshire requires that parents complete a "parenting plan" before they divorce. Instead of seeing this as another hoop to jump through, try and use this time as an opportunity to establish a positive co-parenting relationship with the other parent. Your children will be the better for it.
- Try to develop a business-like relationship with your former spouse. Set up a special time to talk with your former spouse about decisions or plans. Transition times can be difficult. For example, your former spouse may come in your house without knocking. He may sit down in front of the television while the kids get ready. If this makes you uncomfortable, find another place to transfer the children. You may feel more comfortable meeting at a neutral place like a restaurant or store. Don't discuss important issues when transferring children from one household to

another. This can cause tempers to flare and upset children. In some cases it's best to hold discussions with your former spouse over the telephone. This way, you may end the call if necessary. Other parents communicate through letters or e-mail. Keep the communication on track. Stick to discussing issues such as child-contact or holiday arrangements, financial matters and topics related to the children's school or their health.

- If you are unhappy about something your former spouse has done, approach the subject by discussing the children. Try saying, "Jimmy feels excited when he knows he's going to see you, but when you're late, he says he's disappointed and that you don't really want to spend time with him."
- Keep agreements and do your best not to break appointments.
- Don't discuss personal matters with your former spouse. Keep away from topics such as dating or other intimate details of your lives.
- Focus on what you can control in the situation rather than trying to change your former spouse. If your former spouse calls your house early each school morning, consider what you can control. In this case, you may work together to find a better time to call. If this doesn't help, you may decide to not answer the phone.
- Don't make unreasonable demands of a former spouse and don't allow him or her to expect extra favors from you. It's inappropriate for a former spouse to expect you to work on a car or mow the lawn. It's also unfair for you to ask him or her to change plans at the last minute. Both parents must honor commitments about parenting and support the children.
- Remember, always try to be polite.

### **When co-parenting isn't working**

- Do you worry that your former spouse isn't considering your child's best interests? You may feel like making it hard for him or her. If you do, your child suffers the results. The best situation is to have two parents who act in their child's best interest. The next best situation is having one parent who acts in the child's best interest. The worst is having two parents who are so angry with each other that neither can keep the child's interests in mind.
- In some cases you may need to contact an attorney to discuss alternatives. You may need outside help if you fear the current arrangements are harming your child and you can't work it out with your former spouse.
- Find neutral ways to deliver messages to your former spouse. Try using email as a way to deliver these messages or send a letter through the mail.
- Don't send messages to your former spouse through your children. It's equally important to have children speak directly to the parent involved about their feelings and concerns. Teenagers may need encouragement and support to tell a parent why they doesn't want to see him/her. Remember, your children should be responsible for their own feelings and decisions. Don't put yourself in the middle.

- Some families find it helpful to involve a counselor, pastor or divorce mediator.
- Know what community resources are available. Tap these resources when you need support. You may feel frustrated when communication with a former spouse is strained. You may need advice or someone to talk to.

Children and adults benefit when co-parenting relationships are successful. When former spouse relationships are strained, business-like arrangements can help adults to work together. You and your spouse also can support one another when working out difficulties with a former spouse. As you share ideas and work together, you will be solving problems and creating a positive atmosphere for your stepfamily. Clear communication and flexibility are key.

Sources

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