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# TIPS FOR DIVORCED PARENTS: CO-PARENTING WITH YOUR EX & MAKING JOINT CUSTODY WORK

by Jocelyn Block, M.A., Melinda Smith, M.A.  
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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 other 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 is the best option for your children

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: Communicating with your ex

##### Relieving stress in the moment—no matter who you're dealing with

It may seem impossible to stay calm when dealing with a difficult ex-spouse who's hurt you in the past or has a real knack for pushing your buttons. But by practicing quick stress relief techniques, you can learn to stay in control when the pressure builds.

Peaceful, consistent, and purposeful communication with your ex is essential to the success of co-parenting—even though it may seem absolutely impossible. It all begins with your mindset. Think about communication with your ex as having the highest purpose: your child's well-being. Before contact with your ex, ask yourself how your talk will affect your child, and resolve to conduct yourself with dignity. Make your child the focal point of every discussion you have with your ex-partner.

Communication with your ex is likely to be a tough task. Remember that it isn't always necessary to meet your ex in person—speaking over the phone or exchanging texts or emails is fine for the majority of conversations. The goal is to establish conflict-free communication, so see which type of contact works best for you. Whether talking via email, phone, or in person, the following methods can help you initiate and maintain effective communication:

- Set a business-like tone. Approach the relationship with your ex as a business partnership where your “business” is your children’s well-being. Speak or write to your ex as you would a colleague—with cordiality, respect, and neutrality. Relax and talk slowly.
- Make requests. Instead of making statements, which can be misinterpreted as demands, try framing as much as you can as requests. Requests can begin “Would you be willing to...?” or “Can we try...?”
- Listen. Communicating with maturity starts with listening. Even if you end up disagreeing with the other parent, you should at least be able to convey to your ex that you’ve understood his or her point of view. And listening does not signify approval, so you won’t lose anything by allowing your ex to voice his or her opinions.
- Show restraint. Keep in mind that communicating with one another is going to be necessary for the length of your children's entire childhood—if not longer. You can train yourself to not overreact to your ex, and over time you can become numb to the buttons he or she tries to push.
- Commit to meeting/talking consistently. Frequent communication with your ex will convey the message to your children that you and their other parent are a united front. This may be extremely difficult in the early stages of your divorce or separation.
- Keep conversations kid-focused. You can control the content of your communication. Never let a discussion with your ex-partner digress into a conversation about your needs or his/her needs; it should always be about your child's needs only.

#### Improving the relationship with your ex

If you are truly ready to rebuild trust after a separation or divorce, be sincere about your efforts. Remember your children’s best interests as you move forward to improve your relationship.

- Ask his or her opinion. This fairly simple technique can effectively jump-start positive communications between you and your ex. Take an issue that you don't feel strongly about, and ask for your ex's input, showing that you value his or her input.
- Apologize. When you’re sorry about something, take the time to apologize sincerely—even if the incident happened a long time ago. Apologizing can be very powerful in moving your relationship away from being adversaries.
- Chill out. If a special outing with your ex is going to cut into your time with your child by an hour, graciously let it be. Remember that it’s all about what is best for your child; plus, when you show flexibility, your ex is more likely to be flexible with you.

#### 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.

#### Important issues

Major decisions need to be made by both you and your ex. Being open, honest, and straightforward about important issues is crucial to both your relationship with your ex and your children's well-being.

- **Medical needs.** Effective co-parenting can help parents focus on the best medical care for the child, and can help reduce anxiety for everyone. Whether you decide to designate one parent to communicate primarily with health care professionals or attend medical appointments together, keep one another in the loop.
- **Education.** School plays a major role in maintaining a stable environment for your kids, so be sure to let them know about changes in your child's living situation. Speak with your ex ahead of time about class schedules, extra-curricular activities, and parent-teacher conferences, and be polite to him or her at school or sports events.
- **Financial issues.** The cost of maintaining two separate households can strain your attempts to be effective co-parents. Set a realistic budget and keep accurate records for shared expenses. Be gracious if your ex provides opportunities for your children that you cannot provide.

#### Disagreements

As you co-parent, you and your ex are bound to disagree over certain issues. Keep the following in mind as you try to come to consensus with your ex.

- **Respect can go a long way.** Simple manners are often neglected between co-parents, even though they should be the foundation for co-parenting. Being considerate and respectful includes letting your ex know about school events, being flexible about your schedule when possible, and taking his or her opinion seriously.
- **Keep talking.** It might sound tedious, but if you disagree about something important, you will need to continue to communicate about the topic. Never discuss your differences of opinions with or in front of your child. If you still can't agree, you may need to talk to a third party, like a therapist or mediator.
- **Don't sweat the small stuff.** If you disagree about important issues like a medical surgery or choice of school for your child, by all means keep the discussion going. But if you want your child in bed by 7:30 and your ex says 8:00, try to let it go and save your energy for the bigger issues.
- **Compromise.** Yes, you will need to come around to your ex spouse's point of view as often as he or she comes around to yours. It may not always be your first choice, but compromise allows you both to "win" and makes both of you more likely to be flexible in the future.

### Co-parenting tips for divorced parents: Making transitions easier

The actual move from one household to another, whether it happens every few days or just on weekends, can be a very hard time for children. Transitions represent a major change in your children's reality. Every reunion with one parent is also a separation with the other; each "hello" is also a "goodbye." In joint custody arrangements, transition time is inevitable, but there are many things you can do to help make exchanges and transitions easier, both when your children leave and return.

#### When your child leaves

As kids prepare to leave your house for your ex's, try to stay positive and deliver them on time. You can use the following strategies to help make transitions easier:

- Help children anticipate change. Remind kids they'll be leaving for the other parent's house a day or two before the visit.
- Pack in advance. Depending on their age, help children pack their bags well before they leave so that they don't forget anything they'll miss. Encourage packing familiar reminders like a special stuffed toy or photograph.
- Always drop off—never pick up the child on "switch day." It's a good idea to avoid "taking" your child from the other parent so that you don't risk interrupting or curtailing a special moment. Drop off your child at the other parent's house instead.

#### When your child returns

The beginning of your children's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. You can try the following to help your child adjust:

- Keep things low-key. When children first enter your home, try to have some down time together—read a book or do some other quiet activity.
- Double up. To make packing simpler and make kids feel more comfortable when they are at the other parent's house, have kids keep certain basics—toothbrush, hairbrush, pajamas—at both houses.
- Allow the child space. Children often need a little time to adjust to the transition. If they seem to need some space, do something else nearby. In time, things will get back to normal.
- Establish a special routine. Play a game or serve the same special meal each time your child returns. Kids thrive on routine—if they know exactly what to expect when they return to you it can help the transition.

#### 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.

#### Resources & References

Co-Parenting After Divorce – A four-page booklet that includes a checklist of what to include in a co-parenting plan and descriptions of different types of custody arrangements. (Montana State University).

Ten Commandments of Co-Parenting – A list of co-parenting basics. (Co-Parenting 101)

Parenting After Divorce – Discusses how to move beyond a hostile or conflicted relationship so that your children can benefit from ex-spouses parenting cooperatively. (Phillip M. Stahl, Ph.D.)

Non-Residential Parenting After Divorce – Tips for the parent who does not have custody or who lives a long distance away, and can't be involved with the children every day. (Montana State University)