

# **Raising Kids with Your Ex**

## **Co-Parenting After a Separation or Divorce**

If you've decided to separate or get a divorce and have kids, your next important decision should be about co-parenting. Divorce may be the end of a marriage, but it is not the end of the family. People who separate but continue to work cooperatively as parents give their children the best chances for a smooth adjustment to living in two separate households and continued growth. Co-parenting is the term used when a divorced couple works together to maintain an amicable relationship and a consistent parenting plan for the sake of their children. Choosing this type of parenting relationship will benefit all involved, diminish some of the challenges of divorce, and encourage positive long term relationships.

### **What is co-parenting?**

Most divorced couples with children want to remain actively involved in their children's lives. Co-parenting means sharing parenting responsibilities with an ex-spouse living in a separate household. Co-parenting is a conscious decision by both parents to put the children's sense of security first and to work out an amicable relationship for the sake of their kids. Co-parenting plans, often worked out during the divorce process, should be clear, practical and considerate of both households.

Co-parenting plans, also called "parenting plans" or "parenting partnerships," are gaining popularity because of their benefit for the kids. Most experts agree that children adjust better to divorce when both parents continue to be active in their lives and when parents avoid putting the children in the middle of personal feelings and conflicts. In some states, it is now a mandatory part of the divorce process to file a co-parenting or shared parenting plan.

### **Why is a co-parenting relationship best for your children?**

Kids with divorced parents still have the same needs that all children have – to feel secure, loved and protected. Divorce creates a sense of insecurity and instability for kids – the family unit they have grown to rely on, for better or worse, is over. The most important thing you and your ex-spouse can do is show your kids that they will continue to be loved throughout their lives. Setting up a co-parenting partnership as a part of the joint custody arrangement is a really important way to demonstrate that your kids are a priority.

Kids whose divorced parents have a cooperative and cordial relationship:

- Feel security and love from seeing their parents continue to work together, and will probably adapt better to the divorce
- Learn from their parents how to solve problems, cooperate and be flexible
- Benefit from consistent rules and two sets of eyes paying attention to them

Through your attitude, actions and parenting partnership, your kids will recognize that they are more important than the conflict that ended your marriage, and understand that your love for them will prevail despite changing circumstances.

## Parenting with a plan

Ideally it would be great to keep some of the kids' familiar routines while developing new arrangements for the two households. Parents should discuss decision-making rights and responsibilities with regard to their children, and set up a means for dispute resolution if it is needed.

The shared parenting plan should address:

- Custody or visitation schedule
- Education
- Finances
- Children's medical needs or concerns
- Discipline and household rules
- Holidays and special events
- Decision making guidelines

A good co-parenting plan should be flexible to allow for changing needs and circumstances. The Online Resources below include articles with step by step instructions on developing a co-parenting plan.

## Tips for successful co-parenting

In addition to basic parenting issues, the couple must somehow find a way to do what was probably a challenge in their relationship: ***communicate clearly and effectively with each other***. Working together is essential to the success of a co-parenting arrangement. It may be hard to work through your communication issues, but everyone will benefit if you do.

Other aspects of co-parenting are the same as parenting in one household:

- Be respectful of your ex spouse.
- Resolve conflicts and discuss major issues privately, not in front of the children.

- Don't confide, complain or grumble about your ex to your kids – you need family, friends or a therapist for that role.
- Don't use your kids as messengers between you and the other parent.
- Assure your kids that both parents will listen to feelings and address needs cooperatively.

## **Conflict and hard feelings as an obstacle to co-parenting**

Unresolved anger and frustration will create a significant barrier to co-parenting. It can be a challenge to keep feelings about divorce from contaminating our parenting roles and responsibilities. While it may not be easy, it can be done. If you and your ex really can't work out your difficulties, think about working with a counselor or mediator for the good of your kids. It is possible to attend to your own needs while also attending to the children's needs, and refusing to put your children in the middle of adult conflicts.

There are some situations where co-parenting is not an option, including families with a history of domestic violence/spousal abuse, child abuse, substance abuse or severe mental illness

### **Take the high road, if possible**

If you find yourself constantly fighting with your ex, and frustrated about his or her inability to put the children first, try to remember what is important. Your kids will benefit from having a loving relationship with *both* of their parents throughout their lives. The co-parenting relationship is somewhat temporary. When your kids grow up, you won't have to have daily battles with your ex about caretaking and discipline issues, but your kids will want to have their other parent in their life. Try to promote a good long term relationship between your kids and their other parent by putting your own feelings aside temporarily.

## **Co-parenting guidelines**

### **Tips for discipline and household rules**

Strong differences in child rearing styles often contribute to marital problems, and a parenting plan will have to address these differences. Although kids may say they don't want rules, they also do not want to feel ignored or unimportant. Rules and limits are a sign of attention and love. You and your ex-spouse should care enough to establish consistent guidelines so that your kids don't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments.

Where you can, aim for some consistency in schedule (meals, homework, bedtimes) and discipline. Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but do your best to be consistent. If you are supportive of the disciplinary environment in the other residence, hopefully your ex will do the same. So, if the kids have lost TV privileges,

follow through with the restriction. The same can be done for rewarding good behavior. If you work together, the kids will respond.

### **Co-parenting tips for custody and visitation schedules**

First of all, divorcing parents must work out a schedule that is fair and practical, and that takes into consideration each parent's strengths and availability.

- Establish a routine for visitation and transfer from one household to the other, but prepare to be flexible.
- Prepare for transfer times – be prompt and respectful of each other.
- Don't use transfer times for adult discussions: for important information about medication or homework, consider putting it in writing or discussing it before the actual transfer.
- Help children feel like they have two homes, and allow them time to adjust.

### **Co-parenting guidelines for managing your children's education**

Considering that children spend a large amount of time in school or doing school-related activities, you will want to work with your ex to make those experiences positive ones. Sometimes teachers and staff members play a major role in maintaining a stable environment for your kids. Let them know about changes in your child's living situation. Here are some guidelines for co-parents:

- Ask your children's teachers to send all correspondence to both parents.
- Talk with the other parent ahead of time about class schedules or extra-curricular activities, parent-teacher conferences, etc.
- Be polite to your spouse at school events or sports events. Rude behavior or comments are distracting and humiliating to kids.

### **Co-parenting financial issues**

Unfortunately, most families have less money after a divorce. The cost of maintaining two separate households can strain your attempts to be effective co-parents. But there are ways to make co-parenting easier.

- Make prompt payments of support and alimony.
- Allow your children to visit your ex even when the support check is late. Doing otherwise could backfire and trigger court action against you.
- Do not ask your child to deliver cash or support checks to your ex.
- Set a realistic budget and keep receipts and accurate records for shared expenses.
- Avoid excess spending on kids to compensate for the divorce.
- Be gracious if your ex provides vacations or opportunities that you cannot provide.

## **Managing children's medical needs**

Children who have chronic health conditions or disabilities will benefit greatly when their parents work as a team. Effective co-parenting can help parents focus on the best medical care for the child, and it can help reduce anxiety for everyone. Here are some tools.

- Choose one parent to communicate primarily with health care professionals, or attend medical appointments together.
- Keep a file of your child's health care and share the information with your ex.
- Be honest when discussing your child's health problems, try not to inflate them or minimize them to manipulate your ex.
- Transfer medications to your ex-spouse, not your child, at trade-off times. Include written instructions on dosage and side effects with the medication.
- Avoid overreacting if your child's illness becomes worse during a visit to your ex's home, look for information and facts.

## **Co-parenting suggestions for holidays and special events**

Custody arrangements made through a court often include plans for holidays. As co-parents, you should aim to be flexible and fair with holiday scheduling. For example, some kids would prefer to spend one-half day with each parent rather than only see one parent on a holiday. Other kids and parents find this too fragmented, so they alternate holidays.

If your child is having a special event, such as a graduation party or religious rite of passage, and you haven't been invited, create your own celebration for your child with friends and loved ones. Let your child know it's OK to have a good time with the other parent. If you are sad about being without your child at a special time, make plans to do something for yourself after your child leaves.

## **Holiday blues**

One of the first steps to successful co-parenting during holidays is to take care of your emotions. Some newly divorced people consider holidays or special events an exciting opportunity to celebrate in a new, more meaningful way; but many parents and kids experience strong emotions at these times. Anger, jealousy, shame, guilt, or fear may surface or be repressed and trigger depression or anxiety. This can steer you off course from your best co-parenting plans. To help yourself and your kids, take some time to share those feelings with a friend, family member or therapist.