

How to Successfully Co-Parent After Divorce or Separation

With divorce or separation can come a host of difficulties and stress for everyone involved. However, when two parents decide to separate, it is usually their children who stand to lose the most. It is not uncommon for children to experience feelings of grief after their parents separate that are similar to those of when a loved one dies. Although there is probably (and may always be) some bitterness between you and your ex, it is crucial that you do not involve your children in whatever unresolved issues you and your ex may have with one another. The most important determinant of how your children will feel and cope throughout your divorce or separation is how you behave and act. Furthermore, how their parents treat each other has the greatest impact on how children survive after their parents' breakup. Co-parenting is about putting your own interests aside and doing what is best for your child. The following are tips for how you can successfully co-parent with your ex, regardless of how you personally feel about him or her:



- ◆ **Put your child's needs first.**

Co-parenting is all about putting aside the question "How are my needs going to be met?" and asking instead, "How are my child's needs going to be met?" By putting aside your own stresses and personal feelings, you and your ex will communicate to your child that he or she will not be deprived of the love and care that he or she needs to feel safe and secure.

- ◆ **Encourage your child's relationship with the other parent.**

Any negative feelings that you may still harbor for your ex should NOT be inflicted upon your children. When you make negative remarks about the other parent (consciously or unconsciously) or try to deny the other parent visitation as a way to get back at them, your child is wounded in the process. Recognize that even though you may no longer love your ex, your child still has a right to do so.

- ◆ **Don't involve your child in continuing conflict.**

Your child did not ask to be put in this situation and they should never be asked or encouraged to take one parent's side against the other. Making a child (no matter how unintentionally) feel as though he or she shouldn't love the other parent or should feel guilty for wanting to spend time with the other parent hurts not only your child's relationship with the other parent, but also your child's relationship with you.

◆ **Make your child's visitation with the other parent as pleasant as possible.**

Visitation should be a time when your child can strengthen his or her bond with the other parent, not a time for you to obtain information about what your ex is doing or to continue your ongoing arguments with one another. Keep the focus on your child and stay as neutral as possible if your child talks about the other parent. Communicate clearly with your ex about visitation plans and stick to mutually agreed upon dates and times. If you are unable to keep your visitation or if last-minute changes must be made, notify your ex as soon as possible and work with him or her to find additional dates or times so that your child is not deprived of his or her time with the other parent.

◆ **Be respectful of the other parent.**

Respectful communication means no yelling or screaming, name-calling, put-downs, sarcasm, or passive-aggressive behavior or comments. Treat your relationship with your ex like that of two business associates working cooperatively together to achieve a common goal. In this case, your goal is to raise a happy, healthy child who knows that he or she is loved and cared for by both parents. Remember, children are much more perceptive than adults realize and will pick up on any negativity that you communicate towards or about your ex through your words, tone, or body language. Since children tend to believe that they are responsible for most of what happens around them, they will interpret these negative signals as anger or disappointment towards *them*, not just the other parent.

◆ **Be willing to compromise.**

Raising a child is no easy task, even in families in which both parents are still together. Recognize that although you and your ex may not completely agree on everything when it comes to your child (for example, appropriate discipline or specifics such as bedtimes, nutrition, allowance, etc.), the most important factor for you two to agree on is that you want what's best for your child. As long as your child's health and well-being are not at risk, allow the other parent to parent their way when your child is with them, even though their parenting style might be very different from yours. If your child points out that he or she has different rules when they are with the other parent, help to diffuse any confusion your child may feel by communicating clearly what your rules and expectations are. (Example: "I understand that you get to stay up later when you are with your mom/dad and that's his/her choice to allow you to do so. When you are here, however, bedtime is at _____.").

◆ **Be patient with your child.**

Allow your child to feel upset, hurt, angry about the separation and encourage him or her to find healthy outlets for these feelings—writing in a journal, doing artwork, playing sports, speaking with a counselor, etc. Still set appropriate limits on what is acceptable behavior, but reinforce to your child that he or she has the right to feel however he or she wants to about the situation. If your child opens up to you about how he or she is feeling, keep the focus on them—this is not the time to launch into how difficult things have been for you too since the separation. Try not to take it personally if your child expresses disappointment or anger that you and the other parent decided to separate. Furthermore, don't try to justify the separation to your child, but instead reflect that this must be very difficult for them and that you will be as supportive to them as possible while they are adjusting to the change.

◆ **Seek help and support when you need it.**

Despite your best efforts, you may feel that you and your ex just can't seem to reach an acceptable middle ground in which you are both working cooperatively for the sake of your children. In this case, you may consider contacting a counselor or trained mediator to help you and the other parent work through your differences and the conflicts that are preventing the two of you from being able to communicate effectively. Additionally, you may be experiencing some individual stress as a result of adapting to the challenges and changes both during and after your separation, in which case you may benefit from talking to your own counselor who can help you find ways to effectively cope with your stress and/or negative emotions.