



## Co-Parenting Tips for Divorced Parents

Making Joint Custody Work After a Divorce or Separation



Co-parenting after a split is rarely easy, especially if you have a contentious relationship with your ex-partner. You may be concerned about your ex's parenting abilities, stressed about child support or other financial issues, feel worn down by conflict, or think you'll never be able to overcome all the resentments in your relationship. But co-parenting amicably with your ex can give your children the stability, security, and close relationships with both parents they need. For the sake of your kids' well-being, it is possible for you to overcome co-parenting challenges and develop a cordial working relationship with your ex. With these tips, you can remain calm, stay consistent, and resolve conflicts to make joint custody work and enable your kids to thrive.

### What is co-parenting?

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Unless your family has faced serious issues such as [domestic violence](/articles/abuse/domestic-violence-and-abuse.htm) (/articles/abuse/domestic-violence-and-abuse.htm) or [substance abuse](/home-pages/addictions.htm) (/home-pages/addictions.htm), co-parenting—having both parents play an active role in their children's daily lives—is the best way to ensure all your kids' needs are met and they are able to retain close relationships with both parents. Research suggests that the quality of the relationship between co-parents can also have a strong influence on the mental and emotional well-being of children, and the incidence of anxiety and depression. Of course, putting aside relationship issues, especially after an acrimonious split, to co-parent agreeably can be easier said than done.

Joint custody arrangements can be exhausting, infuriating, and fraught with stress. It can be extremely difficult to get past the painful history you may have with your ex and overcome built-up resentments. Making shared decisions, interacting with each another at drop-offs, or just speaking to a person you'd rather forget all about can seem like impossible tasks. Despite the many challenges, though, it is possible to develop an amicable working relationship with your ex for the sake of your children.

## Making co-parenting work

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The key to successful co-parenting is to separate the personal relationship with your ex from the co-parenting relationship. 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.

### Benefits for your children

Through your co-parenting partnership, your kids should 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. 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 new living situations, 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 to build and maintain stronger relationships.
- ▶ **Are mentally and emotionally healthier.** Children exposed to conflict between co-parents are more likely to develop issues such as depression, anxiety, or ADHD.

## Co-parenting tip 1: Set hurt and anger aside

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Successful co-parenting 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](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) (</articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm>), 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.

### Don't put your 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 use your children to convey messages to your co-parent, it puts them in the center of your conflict. The goal is to keep your child out of your relationship issues, so call or email your ex directly.

**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 their other parent that is free of your influence.

## Tip 2: Improve communication with your co-parent

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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.

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.

### Co-parenting communication methods

However you choose to communicate, the following methods can help you initiate and maintain [effective communication](/articles/relationships-communication/effective-communication.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/effective-communication.htm):

**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 their 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 they try to push.

**Commit to meeting/talking consistently.** Though it may be extremely difficult in the early stages, frequent communication with your ex will convey the message to your children that you and your co-parent are a united front.



(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm)

[Quick Stress Relief: \(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) Using Your Senses to Alleviate Stress

**Keep conversations kid-focused.** Never let a discussion with your ex-partner digress into a conversation about your needs or their needs; it should always be about your child's needs only.

**Quickly relieve stress in the moment.** 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 \(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) techniques, you can learn to stay in control when the pressure builds.

### Improving the relationship with your ex

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If you're truly ready to rebuild trust after a break up, be sincere about your efforts. Remember your children's best interests as you move forward to improve your relationship.

- **Ask your ex's opinion.** This simple technique can jump-start positive communications between you. Take an issue that you don't feel strongly about, and ask for your ex's input, showing that you value their input.
- **Apologize.** When you're sorry about something, 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.

### Tip 3: Co-parent as a team

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Parenting is full of decisions you'll have to make with your ex, whether you like each other 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 co-parent, the details of child-rearing decisions tend to fall into place.

## Aim for co-parenting 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.

## Making important decisions as co-parents

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.** 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.** Be sure to let the school 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 each other 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.

## Resolving co-parenting 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 reach a consensus.

**Respect can go a long way.** Simple manners 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 their opinion seriously.

**Keep talking.** If you disagree about something important, you will need to continue communicating. 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, 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.

## Tip 4: Make transitions and visitation easier

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The actual move from one household to another, whether it happens every few days or just certain weekends, can be a very hard time for children. Every reunion with one parent is also a separation with the other, each "hello" also a "goodbye." While transitions are unavoidable, there are many things you can do to help make them easier on your children.

### When your child leaves

As kids prepare to leave your house for your ex's, try to stay positive and deliver them on time.

**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.** 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 child's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. 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 your 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

It's common that kids in joint custody sometimes refuse to leave one parent to be with the other.

- **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 their 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 they obviously need. 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.



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