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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING



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Introduction

A child needs a relationship with both parents. Even if a child must split time between their parents, it's important that they see each parent as often as possible.

For the child's sake, both parents need to figure out how to raise their children together – even if they are apart. This means being responsible, cooperating and communicating effectively, and supporting the child's unique relationship with each parent.

What is co-parenting?

Co-parenting is the process of two people raising their children together after they have divorced or separated. Both parents play an active role in their children's lives. The key to successful co-parenting is keeping the personal relationship with your ex separate from your co-parenting relationship.



QuickStart

The recommendations in this guide are for parents raising children together when one parent doesn't live with the child(ren) all the time. This guide offers information, tips, and strategies on how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, manage schedules, and stay consistent to ensure children thrive in a stable and loving environment.

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Explaining Separation to Your Kids

One of the hardest things for parents when they decide to separate is telling their children. To make it easier, decide what to say beforehand. Anticipate hard questions and carefully plan how you will answer. If you are both calm and prepared, you will be better equipped to help your child cope.

What to Say

Your children deserve an open – but kid-friendly – explanation.

- **Give them the truth** – but keep it simple. Your children may not understand the complicated reasons for your separation. Remind them that even if some parents have trouble getting along, they never stop loving their kids.
- **Express your love.** Saying, "I love you," might seem simple, but repeating it can make a powerful impact. Reassure them that they will be cared for in all the same ways as before.
- **Talk about some of the changes they can expect.** Mention that while some things will change, others will stay the same.

Responding to Questions

Your children will want to know what's going to happen and, most importantly, who will take care of them.

- Think before you respond. It's OK to take a few moments to consider their question.
- Keep answers simple; too much information in the moment may confuse or upset your child.
- If you don't have an answer, say so. Promise to let them know as soon as you can.
- Avoid blaming or criticizing their other parent.
- Use age-appropriate language.

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Impact by Age

Children experience their parents' separation in different ways based on many different factors. They may feel fear of abandonment, sadness, anger, guilt, and loneliness. They may also act out these emotions with angry outbursts, a drop in school performance, siding with one parent, or pushing for you and your ex to get back together.

QuickNote

Feeling sad or angry over their parents' separation is normal, but if your children display extreme or unusual behavior for an extended period, seek professional help. You know your children best; monitor them closely during and after the separation to see how they are adjusting.



Infants
(0-1 Year)

An infant isn't going to understand what is going on between their parents, but they can recognize anger and harsh words and feel fear, so try to work out disagreements calmly or keep conflict away from your baby.

Infants are just beginning to form attachments, so minimize disruptions and show your baby lots of attention and affection. Since babies have a limited ability to remember, it's crucial to have frequent contact with both parents.

Consistency is also very important for infants. Make sure your parenting plans include a predictable routine for your baby's eating, sleeping, and wake windows.

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Young Toddlers
(1-3 Years)

Toddlers are starting to become more mobile and learning how to communicate what they want. They may also experience separation anxiety since they are beginning to recognize their caregivers. Signs of distress to watch out for include mood changes, nightmares, and changes in toileting.

Preschoolers
(3-5 Years)

At this age, children think they're the center of the universe and so may think they had something to do with your family's separation. Keep a consistent schedule and reassure children they are not to blame for the situation.

Younger children will want to hear how their needs will be met. Reassure them that they will still have someone to take them to their extracurricular activities, cook their meals, help with homework, snuggle at bedtime, etc.



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School-Age Children

(6-10 Years)

This age group is entering school and forming new relationships outside of their family. They may not ask too many questions at first, but they will still have a lot of fears and worries about the future. Develop a consistent schedule for school and extra-curricular activities to support their new friendships and interests.

Signs of distress include angry outbursts, a drop in school performance, issues sleeping, and complaints of physical aches, and pains.

Preteens

(11-12 Years)

Preteens have the tendency to see things in black and white, so they may side with one parent. Encourage them to spend time with both parents and do your best to support their schooling and any outside activities.

Signs of distress include loss of interest in friendships, depression, and feeling isolated.



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Early Teens
(13-15 Years)

At this age, your children might want to spend more time with friends than family. Young teenagers benefit from firm, but fair, guidelines and positive role models. You may choose to involve them in creating the parenting plan. Signs of distress can include isolation, excessive anger, problems at school or with peers, acting out sexually, and substance use.



Late Teens
(16-18 Years)

Teenagers have more life experience (e.g., have friends with separated/divorced parents, exposed to television and social media) and are more likely to understand how your separation will impact them. Teens in this age group are exploring their independence, and at the same time, preparing for separation from their parents.

However, teens still need rules. They also need to know they have a safe space to express themselves and be encouraged to do so.

Questions to Expect from All Age Groups

- Why are you splitting up?
- Did I do something to cause this?
- Do I have to take a side?
- Who decides who I live with?
- Can I do anything to get my parents back together?

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Age-Appropriate Needs and Challenges

Babies

In co-parenting situations, a baby usually resides with one parent and has frequent visits with the other. Babies can have a preference for one parent and feel anxious when they're separated from that parent for too long. If that happens, the visitation schedule may need adjusting.

Toddlers

Toddlers are becoming more independent and are more aware of the world around them. Many toddlers have trouble with change and may find transitions between parents' homes difficult to manage. At this age, children also remember people and events and they might miss the parent who isn't there. Your co-parenting plan should allow for plenty of contact with both parents and give both of you opportunities to feed, play, bathe and read to them, put them to sleep, etc.

School-Age Children

School-age children are used to separation from their parents because of school, time spent with friends, outside activities, etc. At this age, children will be exposed to many topics from TV, the Internet, social media, and their friends. These could include substance abuse, sex, and violence. Let your children know they can come to both parents with questions and encourage them to talk about things openly.

Teenagers

Teenagers tend to prefer to spend time with their friends instead of family. They also may get busy with after-school jobs, hobbies, events, and extracurricular activities. Due to this, teens may have conflicts with parenting time. Parents should also make sure to address issues such as driving, curfew, dating, drinking, etc.

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Coping with Transitions by Age

Children thrive on routine, so structure and consistency are key. When your child knows what to expect, they'll feel more relaxed and confident.

The following are some general things you can do to help the back and forth between homes go more smoothly:

Help Children Understand the Schedule

When adjusting to two homes, being organized can go a long way. How you keep your children informed will depend on their age. For many ages, a calendar displayed in a shared space will work. For younger ones, mark changeover dates in colorful writing or with stickers or magnets. Older children may want to use a digital calendar on their phone or tablet.

Create Rituals

Having positive rituals in place is a good way to ease discomfort during transitions. For younger kids, this may be a certain activity at home, such as playing with Play-Doh or building Legos, and for older children, it could be a favorite activity outside the home.

Stay Present

Since transitions can be emotional, your child needs your full attention. Listen carefully, maintain eye contact, and give affection in the form your child likes. It can be hard to see your child upset or leave them while they're crying, but if you keep checking up on them or contacting them several times a day to offer comfort, it can worsen your child's anxiety.

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Creating a Co-parenting Plan

Raising children comes with challenges. When parents don't live together, the relationship can get complicated and present even more obstacles.

Creating a clear and concise co-parenting plan provides both parents with a comprehensive tool to use down the road. It serves as a reference point if a parent forgets what was decided and reminds you both of the agreement you made to your children and to each other. It provides parents with predictability and consistency and will be useful in managing future conflicts.

A co-parenting plan can either be a formal legal document or a more informal plan agreed upon by both parents. It should identify how children will spend time with each parent.



QuickNote

In this new partnership, you must make shared decisions for the benefit of your child – not your own.

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What should a co-parenting plan cover?

Key components of a co-parenting plan include the following:

Parenting Time

This is where you will lay out all the details of visitation (i.e., when your children will spend time with you and when they will spend time with their other parent). Create schedules for when school is in session and for summer breaks, vacations, etc.

Decision-making

Who will make day-to-day decisions and how will you make important decisions together? Discuss which parent makes time-sensitive decisions. Will it be only one of you? Will you make the decision together? Or will the parent who has the kids at the time make the call? You may decide to divide the task, where one parent makes medical decisions and the other makes decisions about school.



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Living Arrangements

This is the section where you will define where the children will be living. The most common scenario is that the two parents have separate households and the child goes back and forth between them.



Financial Support

Discuss how finances will be handled (who pays for what and how costs will be split), including hobbies, extracurricular activities, transportation costs, and school supplies. This can also include child support, tax considerations, and college savings.



Communication

This is likely the most important part of the co-parenting plan as it helps to establish good communication practices between you, which can help you both navigate disagreements and avoid unnecessary conflict or anger. Here you can decide how you will communicate about your children (e.g., shared calendars, co-parenting apps, weekly check-ins by phone) and discuss boundaries for your partnership.

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QuickNote

No matter how hard you try, you won't be able to plan for every situation. This plan is your best effort to establish expectations, fairness, and consistency. Exceptions may be needed at times, so build in a process you both will follow for addressing them as they come up.

As Children Grow

While it might be relatively easy to agree on what's best for your children now, it can be more difficult to grasp what they may need in five or 10 years. Create your plan based on the current circumstances while also anticipating future needs.



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Co-parenting Plan Template

Which house is "home base"?

Children's drop-off and pick-up

Extracurricular activities and payment

Religion/church attendance

Health treatments (medical and mental)

Legal decisions

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Internet and social media use

Health care (insurance, medical procedures, etc.)

College savings

Pets

Other

Considerations for Older Children

The following are some issues that may come up with older children and teens:

- Traveling outside of the country
- Employment
- Driving and car insurance
- Cell phone purchase and usage
- Curfew
- Tattoos and piercings
- Smoking and drug testing
- Consent to marry
- Permission to enlist in the Armed Forces

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Communication

For some, peacefully communicating with their ex-partner seems impossible – but clear and consistent communication is a pillar of a healthy co-parenting partnership. Think of your communication as having a higher purpose: the well-being of your children.

Each stage of parenting comes with specific challenges. When communication breaks down between parents, it usually leads to one parent making all the decisions – which can lead to resentment and arguments down the road.

Early in parenthood, the choices you make for your child may seem small, but as your child grows, decisions become more significant. Work together to set a positive communication standard now so you can focus on your children's needs at every stage.



QuickNote

Your children watch you more than you realize. If you display poor communication (e.g., give the silent treatment, hold grudges) to someone they love, what does that tell your child about how to resolve a conflict?

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Tips for Communication

In whatever way you choose to communicate with your child's other parent, the following tips can help you initiate and maintain good communication:

- **Adopt a business-like tone.** Approach the relationship with a business mindset – where your business is the health and wellness of your children. Communicate with your ex as you would with a colleague. Keep it neutral and respectful with an emphasis on teamwork and consistency.
- **Make requests, not demands.** Instead of making statements, like "Drop off the children after dinner," try reframing it as a request as much as possible. Say, "Would you be willing to…?" or "Can we try…?"
- **Show restraint.** When talking about how to raise your child, it would be unusual not to have strong feelings about issues that come up. Sometimes frustrations are heightened by unresolved emotions surrounding your separation. Be aware of what triggers you and know when to politely step back from a heated discussion.
- **Schedule time to talk.** Have a regular phone call to discuss your child. Prepare an agenda for the conversation and stick to it. Make sure it's a good time for both of you and share positive things about your child with each other.

QuickNote

It isn't always necessary to meet in person; talking on the phone or exchanging texts or emails can work for many conversations. Decide which type of contact works best for both of you. Flip to the "Using Technology" section in this tab for more guidance.

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Strategies for Improving Communication

When a couple separates, there can be hurt feelings, broken promises, and a lack of trust. If you're truly committed to making your co-parenting journey successful, you both need to be sincere in your efforts to work together and communicate effectively.

- **Stay focused.** Keep your conversations centered on your children. You now only share your children – not your personal lives. Keeping it brief and concise leaves little time to bring up past feelings and keeps you both focused on your children's needs.
- **Ask for your each other's opinion.** This can jumpstart positive communication between you. Ask for your ex's opinion on a topic that you don't feel strongly about. This shows you value what they think.
- **Stay calm and pick your battles.** If a specific outing or event is going to affect the amount of time you have with your child, try to let it go. Your goal is what is best for your child, after all. If you show flexibility, your ex will be more likely to return the gesture.
- **Keep a written record.** Writing down all your co-parenting communications can help keep track of decisions and stay organized. Having it all documented also makes it easier if you have to go to court or mediation.

Using Technology

Technology plays a big part in our daily lives – and it's no different with co-parenting. Using technology, such as apps, messaging platforms, and social media, can have many benefits for your co-parenting relationship.

- **Co-parenting apps:** Apps can help with communication and organization with features like messaging, expense tracking, and calendars.

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- **Shared calendars:** Color-coded events can help both parents stay organized on visitation, children's events, holidays, etc.
- **Sharing files:** Google Drive, Dropbox, or other cloud-based services enable sharing of important documents, medical records, photos, etc.
- **Tracking expenses:** Shared spreadsheets (e.g., Google Sheets) allow for collaboration on expense tracking and money management.
- **Online parenting courses:** Online courses offer guidance on communication, resolving conflict, and child-centered parenting tips.
- **Social media:** While social media can be used, you may need to agree on some rules. Talk about what you're both comfortable sharing and what should stay private.

Benefits

- **Real-time updates:** Co-parents can update one another on visits, appointments, emergencies, etc.
- **More face time:** Video conferencing apps are useful for long-distance co-parenting situations or when one parent is away.
- **Accountability:** Technology leaves a digital trail of communications for help in custody matters and in establishing a record of each parent's involvement in their children's lives.
- **Emotional support:** Text messages, video calls, and other online interactions encourage strong child-parent connections, especially when the child is only with one parent at a time.
- **Reduced conflict:** Shared calendars, expense tracking, and virtual communication can help prevent misunderstandings, leading to less conflict between co-parents.

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Common Co-parenting Conflicts

When communicating, it's OK to disagree. The other parent may not approach parenting in the same way as you, but that doesn't make it wrong. Showing your children that you can resolve conflicts calmly can help them learn a valuable lesson.

Badmouthing Each Other

It can be distressing to hear that your co-parent is saying something disrespectful about you. While you may be angry, what matters most is your child. Hearing their parents talk badly about each other can negatively affect your child's sense of self-worth.

How to address it: Reach out to your co-parent immediately to talk about it. Tell them that while they're allowed to feel however they want to feel about you, it's not OK or healthy to vent their feelings to or in front of your child.

Feeling a Lack of Control

It can be hard to give up complete decision-making over your children. This is especially true if you were the default parent during your time together. Differences will happen, but the important thing is to handle things consistently in both homes.

How to address it: Focus on what you can control. Try to keep your emotions out of it.

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Always Disagreeing

You might disagree on many topics (e.g., screen time, curfew, finances). With so many decisions to be made, it might feel like you never agree.

How to address it: Try to compromise. That way you'll at least get some of what you want. If you have trouble agreeing frequently, enlist the help of a mediator or therapist.

Breaking Promises

Even with a co-parenting plan, there could be times when one parent falls through on an agreement. This should be addressed right away.

How to address it: Firmly let your ex know that if they don't follow the rules both of you agreed upon, they will have to be changed. Discuss the plan and decide what's working and what isn't.

Effects of Conflict on Children

If conflict between parents isn't handled well, it can have a big impact on a child's well-being. For example, a child might feel like they have to side with one parent or worry that one parent won't love them anymore if they show affection for the other one.

Children exposed to high conflict might:

- Stop trying new things; become withdrawn.
- Act out at school.
- Have trouble focusing.
- Have problems getting along with others, including their parents.

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Conflict Resolution Strategies

Consider the following as you try to work through your disagreements:

Change your mindset: Conflict resolution is much easier when co-parents realize they're on the same team and have the same goal. For most co-parents, that goal is the happiness and health of their children. Shifting your thinking can help you focus on finding cooperative solutions, rather than who's winning and who's losing.

Show respect: Respect should be the foundation for your co-parenting relationship. This can involve keeping the other parent aware of any upcoming events, being flexible when needed, and taking their opinions and ideas seriously.

Keep communicating: If you disagree on an important topic, keep talking about it. Never bring it up in front of or with your child. If you can't resolve it, you may need to speak to a third party (e.g., mediator, therapist).

Learn to compromise: At times, you will need to come around to your co-parent's point of view – and them to yours. Compromising can give you both a "win" and encourages flexibility moving forward.

Apologize: Blaming your co-parent for something is never going to be a successful way of resolving conflict. Admitting you're wrong, on the other hand, can be effective in squashing an argument. If something happens that you're sorry about, apologize promptly. It's also important to take an apology from your ex-spouse at face value and avoid the urge to punish them for their mistake or oversight.

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Avoid tunnel vision: When thinking about their child's well-being, some parents insist they know the best way forward and refuse to compromise. Being too close-minded makes it easy for one parent to paint the other as unreasonable or controlling.

Pinpoint problem areas: If there are certain topics that you and your co-parent always disagree on (e.g., visitation schedules, consistent discipline), they can become a regular source of conflict between you. Work together to identify these "hot button" issues and come up with a framework to help you address them.

Relieve your stress: When trying to resolve conflict, feelings of anger and stress aren't conducive to a productive interaction. Know what stress-relieving methods work for you (a walk outside, listening to music, meditation, etc.). Use these strategies during a conflict to help you reflect and approach the situation in a calmer way.



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Getting Help

When co-parents have trouble communicating, issues can escalate and negatively impact their children. Sometimes, parents need a neutral third party to help them come to agreements on what's best for their children.

Family Mediation

Family mediation helps people in relationships that are ending. It can help you resolve disputes without going to court. Applying for a court order is costly and will put more stress on both of you as well as your children.

What is the mediation process?

Mediation usually involves a series of meetings, either online or in person. Trained mediators help you identify issues, find solutions, and get clarity on next steps – without taking sides. They make sure each of you has time and space to express yourself, while keeping the conversations safe, productive, and focused.

If you reach an agreement in mediation, the judge will review it and decide whether or not to approve it. If it is approved, you will have a court order.

If you're unable to reach an agreement in mediation, the judge will decide on custody and parenting time for your case. This could happen on the same day as mediation, or you may have to return to court at a later date.

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Co-parent Counseling

Co-parent counseling is a special form of therapy to help parents manage their shared parenting duties. The goal is not to reconcile the parents, but to help them communicate and cooperate so they may have a harmonious co-parenting relationship.

Co-parents will discover better ways to talk to each other, manage their emotions, work through past pain, and learn new parenting strategies.

What can I expect from co-parent counseling?

Every counselor will have a different approach tailored to fit each unique family, but key components of co-parent counseling include:

- **An initial assessment:** A counselor works with the parents to understand their child's personality, needs, and experiences.
- **Setting goals:** Parents get help identifying their common co-parenting goals, which can include enhancing communication, resolving disputes, or maintaining consistency.
- **Effective communication and conflict resolution training:** Parents learn how use clear, respectful language to encourage positive, calmer interactions.
- **Development of a co-parenting plan:** Parents work together to create their co-parenting plan.
- **Support and resources:** Counselors offer guidance and emotional support to help parents manage stress, as well as provide suggestions or referrals for more help, if needed.

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Parenting Styles

There is no universal arrangement that works for all co-parenting families. Both parents need to figure out how their relationship is going to function. Co-parenting relationships tend to fall into one of three categories:

1 Cooperative Co-parenting

Parents with this parenting style can plan, cooperate, and make decisions about their children together. While they may need to negotiate at times, they focus on the growth, health, and well-being of their children.

2 Parallel Co-parenting

Parallel co-parents usually have little to no contact with each other. They work better with clearly defined boundaries and agreements with little flexibility to reduce conflict.

While parallel co-parenting parents may have trouble communicating, they are both dedicated to parenting the child responsibly in their own ways.

3 Conflicted Co-parenting

This co-parenting group is defined by high levels of conflict long after their breakup. Parents are highly focused on their lack of agreement and communication that they're unable to parent together successfully – and the children often get put in the middle.

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Different Rules

It can be confusing or frustrating for a child when one parent enforces rules that the other parent doesn't. The following strategies can help you manage your child's feelings while also being clear about your expectations.

Validate their feelings.

Talking openly can help prepare your child for differences in how they are disciplined. You'll want to be clear about your own rules while not judging your co-parent on theirs.

Maintain respect for your co-parent.

Even if you're the only parent doing this, try to be respectful of your co-parent's rules. Don't dismiss their rules just to gain favor with your child. Keep frustrations to yourself.

Stay consistent in your home.

Create age-appropriate rules, boundaries, and consequences that you will uphold in your own home and explain them clearly to your child. As your child grows, these rules and consequences can be modified.

Be a good role model.

Having consistent limits and boundaries is helpful, but make sure you are also behaving appropriately. For example, if you raise your voice at your children and then get angry when they yell back at you.

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Boundaries

Setting boundaries contributes to a respectful, positive co-parenting partnership. Clear boundaries can make shared parenting easier and help you prioritize your child's well-being.

Benefits of Boundaries

- **Improved communication.** When there are "ground rules" decided by both parents, it can be less stressful to bring up issues as they arise.
- **Clearer expectations.** If both parents are aware of what the other won't tolerate, there will less conflict about failure to meet expectations and less misunderstandings.
- **Decreased stress.** With clear boundaries, each parent knows what is expected and can worry less about the other parent's choices, behaviors, and reactions.

Tips for Setting Boundaries

Stick to the custody schedule.

Do your best to follow the custody schedule or visitation plan. Each parent should be aware of when it's their time to be with their children. When it's time to exchange, be reliable and punctual. Being late a few minutes here or there is OK, but parents or children shouldn't be put out regularly due to issues with punctuality.

Ideally, you're able to sit down with your ex to create a visitation plan. If your relationship doesn't allow for this, seek help from a mediator, lawyer, therapist, etc., to help you agree on a schedule that works for everyone.

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Keep personal lives separate.

An important boundary to consider is your and your ex's personal lives. It's normal to be curious if your ex-partner is seeing someone – and with co-parenting, it can be a valid reason to want to know. After all, a new person in your child's life feels like it should be your business. But the truth is your ex's relationships are none of your business (unless it affects your child's safety or well-being).

Generally, co-parents should avoid asking each other about personal matters and refrain from asking the children about them as well.

Don't parent through your children.

Don't rely on your children to relay messages between you or get information about each other. If talking to each other directly is too high-conflict, consider involving a third party like a therapist or mediator.

Create ground rules.

Establish guidelines on how to communicate with each other. Should some topics or types of language be avoided? Agree that if any interaction gets heated, you'll both take a step back and revisit the conversation later.

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Visiting the Other Parent

It may take time for both parents and children to get used to going back and forth between two homes. It's normal to feel frustrated, unsure, and anxious. It will help your children to see you working together to keep things calm and steady.

When Your Child Leaves

As your children get ready to leave your home, stay positive and drop them off on time.

- Remind them regularly when they'll be leaving for the other parent's house. This will help them anticipate the change.
- Depending on their age, help them pack their bag well in advance. This will ensure they don't forget anything important and won't be rushing around when it's time to leave. Encourage them to bring special items, like a framed photo or a special toy.
- Always drop off and avoid picking up. Dropping your child off ensures that you don't interrupt or intrude on special moments they may be having with their other parent.

When Your Child Returns

When your child gets home, there could be tension or feelings of awkwardness. They may just need some time and space to adjust. In time, things should get back to normal.

- When they first get home, encourage some down time. Try reading a book together or doing another low-key activity.
- Have your child keep basic items (e.g., toothbrush, pajamas) at both parents' houses so they don't have to feel like they're constantly packing and unpacking.

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- Implement a special routine for when your child comes home, like playing a game or preparing the same meal. Knowing what to expect can help them feel more comfortable and ease the transition.



Co-parenting Don'ts

- Don't make changes to the visitation schedule or time without working it out with the other parent first.
- Don't panic, get angry, or feel insulted if your child cries or asks for the other parent when they're with you. Sometimes, children (especially younger children) just need to make sure the other parent is still there. Simply ask them if they would like to call the other parent.
- Don't send a new partner or spouse to pick up your children or leave them in charge of your child for long periods of time – this is especially important early in the new relationship.
- Don't use your child as a messenger (to send bills, notes, etc.). It's very hard on children to be put in the middle.
- Don't press your child for information about their visits. This may lessen their enjoyment of the time they spend with their other parent and put them in the middle of your adult relationship. It's OK to ask how the visit went – just don't pry for all the details.

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Sharing Feelings About Visits

If your child seems moody after their visit, don't assume it went poorly. If they tell you about problems or things that concern you regarding the other parent, speak with the other parent before jumping to conclusions.

Help them find the words.

Encourage your child to share their feelings and really listen. They may be feeling sadness, loss, or frustration about things you may not have expected.

Encourage honesty.

Children might be reluctant to share their feelings for fear of hurting you. Let them know that whatever they say is OK.

Keep the lines of communication open.

As children mature, they often have new questions, feelings, or concerns about what happened, so you may have to go over the same things again and again.

Acknowledge their feelings.

You may not be able to fix their problems, but it is important for you to acknowledge their feelings. You can also develop trust by showing that you understand.

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Addressing Safety Concerns

If you are anxious about your child's safety when they're with their other parent, you may feel uncertain about what to do. Your child might have mentioned something about the other parent's behavior or relationships that worries you, or perhaps you have noticed a change in your child's behavior. Don't panic or make hasty decisions since you may not have a clear idea of what's going on.

Document Your Concerns

Keep a record of what your child is telling you and also document your own observations. Kids will sometimes act out their feelings instead of talking about them. Notice when your child is behaving out of character. Are they aggressive, defiant, or withdrawn?

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Listen to Your Child

If your child is starting to refuse to visit their other parent, listen carefully. Let them know you understand and work to help them identify what they're feeling. To get a better idea of their hesitation, ask open-ended questions that answer "who," "what," "where," "how," and "when."

While talking, do your best to:

- Pay attention to their tone and language.
- Be calm and respond in an age-appropriate way.
- Avoid making assumptions and keep an open mind.
- Avoid promising to keep the conversation a secret.

Once you're done talking, reassure your child that you're proud of them for talking to you even though it might have been hard. Encourage them to keep sharing things with you.

Talk to the Other Parent

If you're in contact with your co-parent, bring up the issue with them. While talking, consider the following:

- Approach the subject in a way that avoids blaming.
- Share your worries and give them time to respond.
- Find a way to agree on how to manage the situation.

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What steps can I take if I'm concerned about my child's safety?

If you have concerns about your child's physical and mental safety while they are visiting their other parent, it can be difficult to maintain a co-parenting plan that works. There are resources that can help (e.g., laws, government agencies, court programs).

Supervised Visitation

A judge can order that a parent only has contact with the child when a neutral third party is present.

Child Custody Evaluation

In cases where there are allegations of child abuse or sexual misconduct, a judge can issue temporary emergency orders to protect the child until an evaluation is done. The child custody evaluator will contact Child Protective Services (CPS) and law enforcement with recommendations on how to ensure the child's safety.

Domestic Violence

If there have been incidents of domestic violence, special laws apply when a judge makes decisions on custody of the child.

Report to CPS

If you think your child's safety is at risk due to neglect or abuse, contact CPS right away.

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Self-Care for Co-parents

It's very easy as a parent to put the needs of your children above your own, and sharing custody of your children comes with specific challenges that can negatively impact your mental health. Taking time for yourself will help you recharge and find strength during challenging moments. When you feel relaxed, you have more energy and patience to support your children's needs.

Warning Signs

Everyone has bad days or gets stressed, but as a parent, it's vital to take note of warning signs that your mental wellness is suffering. Early warning signs include the following:

- Problems sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Physical aches and pains
- Loss of joy
- Fatigue

More serious symptoms may include constant depression, feeling disconnected from reality, or withdrawal from family and friends. If you're experiencing these feelings without relief, reach out to a loved one or counselor and get the help you need.

QuickContact

911 If you're having thoughts of harming yourself, get help right away. Go to the nearest emergency room, call **911**, or contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at: **988**

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Self-Care Strategies

Whether your co-parenting relationship is new or has been going on for a while, setting aside a bit of "me time," engaging in favorite hobbies, and pursuing social connections can help you better manage stress and be more present for your children.

Try any of the self-care tips listed below to experience improvements in your mood and overall outlook.

Get regular exercise.
Just 30 minutes of walking every day can help lower stress, boost your mood, and improve your health.

Laugh.
Make it the norm to have humor and fun in your home. Laughing can have a positive impact on your mental health, so plan fun activities you enjoy!

Eat healthy, regular meals, and stay hydrated.
A balanced diet and plenty of water can improve your energy and focus throughout the day. Also, limit caffeinated beverages such as soda and coffee.

Stay connected.
Reach out to friends or family who can provide emotional support and practical help.

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Make sleep a priority.

Stick to a schedule and make sure you're getting enough sleep. Blue light from devices and screens can make it harder to fall asleep, so reduce blue light exposure from your phone, tablet, or computer before bedtime.

Try progressive muscle relaxation.

Use this technique to tighten and relax your muscles. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on a comfortable surface, such as a bed or a couch. Begin with your toes, work your way up through all the major muscle groups, and end with your face and head muscles. This technique works well when you combine it with diaphragmatic breathing, inhaling as you tighten a muscle group, and exhaling as you relax your muscles.

Set goals and priorities.

Decide what must get done now and what can wait. Learn to say "no" to new tasks if you feel like you're taking on too much. Be mindful of what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.

Practice gratitude.

Remind yourself daily of things you are grateful for. Be specific. Write them down at night or replay them in your mind.

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Try a relaxing activity.
Explore yoga or tai chi, or find relaxation programs or apps that incorporate meditation, muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises. For example, diaphragmatic breathing ("deep" or "belly" breathing) is a simple technique where you breathe from the bottom-up instead of the top-down. The result is a deeper, more controlled breath that helps minimize the body's fight-or-flight response, tension, and anxiety.

Stay mindful.
Mindfulness is a practice that helps people fully experience life through listening to and being aware of, all their thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the moment. Practice mindfulness to improve your mood, decrease your stress level, and understand others' points of view.

Focus on positivity.
Identify and challenge your negative and unhelpful thoughts. Practice forgiving yourself and others.

Think rationally.
What you say to yourself has a powerful effect on how you feel and behave. Consider your own self-talk. Do you speak to yourself in rational, balanced, and healthy ways? Or do you engage in thinking that includes errors, such as exaggeration, jumping to conclusions, or all-or-nothing patterns?

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Self-Care QuickTips

Self-care doesn't have to be time-consuming. Even a few minutes a day can make a tremendous impact on your mental wellness. Here are some ideas that only take a few minutes:

Move your body: Blast your favorite song and have a dance party. Involve your children for a few minutes of family fun and silliness.

Start a compliment journal: Every time someone says something nice about you, write it down. Read these out loud to yourself when you're feeling down so you can reflect on the nice things people have said to you.

Permission to scroll: Watch a funny video online and have a good laugh.

Take a hot bath or shower. Hot water is relaxing to the body and can give you quiet time to reflect or just be silent with your thoughts.

Get outside: Go for a quick walk in nature or just sit outside and watch the clouds.

Just breathe: Close your eyes and inhale deeply, pause and hold it, and then release. Repeat this a few times until you feel calm.



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Mental Health Resources

Mental Health America

Mental health support and resources for parents and caregivers.
https://mhanational.org/mental-health-resources-parents

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Explore mental and behavioral health and substance abuse topics and find support.
www.samhsa.gov
SAMHSA Helpline: **800-662-4357**
TTY: **800-487-4889**
Text your ZIP code to: **435748**
Find a treatment provider or facility:
https://findtreatment.gov

HelpGuide.org

Mental health and wellness information and guidance for parents, children, and families.
www.helpguide.org

QuickContact

988

If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health, get help now. Call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at **988** or chat online at:
https://988lifeline.org

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Co-parenting in Blended Families

When two families unite, new personalities, routines, and rules meet to create a new household. Many blended families can successfully work out conflicts and live happily, but it takes patience, mutual respect, and a commitment to strong communication.

Questions to consider:

- **How can everyone get involved in family responsibilities?**
- **What house rules are important to us?**
- **What special rituals or traditions can we create as a new family?**
- **How can we support our child's relationship with their other parent?**

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Different Cultures

When you have shared custody, nurturing an environment that celebrates and respects both parents' cultures can enrich your children's lives and teach them the value of inclusion, diversity, and respect.

Here are some tips for co-parents to support each other's heritage:

Be open about cultural traditions.

Talk about the significance and history of rituals, customs, and holidays.

Celebrate your culture together when possible.

Honoring your culture with your kids can help them value and respect where you and they come from. If being together isn't realistic, give your children the opportunity to celebrate with each parent.

Maintain a multicultural environment in the home.

Encourage your kids to explore their culture through books, movies, and local events and activities to help develop a connection and a greater understanding of their background.

Support each other's efforts.

Try not to disrespect or dismiss your co-parent's cultural practices. Showing genuine interest in your co-parent's heritage can set a positive tone in your relationship and a good example for your children.

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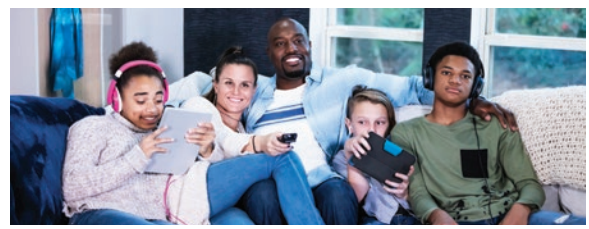
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Tips for Blended Families

Trying to make a blended family a replica of your first family can often create confusion, frustration, and disappointment for everyone involved.

Here are some basic tips to help make your new blended family a successful one:

- Be sensitive when introducing a new partner into your child's life.
- Spend some time alone with your child so they don't feel left out by new family members.
- Avoid favoritism.
- Let your child choose what they want to call their stepparent.
- Have family meetings to talk about everyone's needs.
- Be civil. Family members should try to act civil toward one another rather than ignoring or purposely trying to hurt each other.
- Have compassion for everyone's development. Members of your blended family may be at various life stages and have different needs. They may also be at different stages in accepting this new family.
- Allow room for growth. After a few years of being blended, hopefully your co-parent will grow and members will choose to spend more time together and feel closer to one another.



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Co-parenting in Diverse Family Setups

As you blend families, differences in parenting and lifestyle can create challenges and become a source of frustration for your co-parent as well as your children. These can include:

- **Age differences.** In blended families, there may be children with birthdates closer to one another than with natural siblings.
- **Parental inexperience.** One stepparent may have never been a parent before, and therefore may have no experience with the different stages children go through.
- **Changes in family relationships.** If both parents remarry partners with existing families, it can mean children suddenly find themselves with different roles in two blended families. For example, one child may be the eldest in one family but the youngest in the other. Blending families may also mean one child loses their identity as the only boy or girl in the family.
- **Difficulty accepting another parent.** If your children have spent a long time in a co-parenting family, or still have hopes of their parents reuniting, they may find it hard to accept a new person as an authority figure.
- **Coping with demands of others.** In blended families, planning family events can get complicated, especially when there are custody arrangements to consider. Children may get frustrated that vacations, parties, or weekend trips now require complex arrangements to include new family members.

Continued on the next page.

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- **Changes in family traditions.** Most families have very different ideas about how annual events such as holidays, birthdays, and family vacations should be spent. Kids may feel resentful if they're forced to go along with someone else's routine.
- **Parental insecurities.** A stepparent may feel anxious being compared to a child's natural parent, or may grow resentful if stepchildren often compare them unfavorably to their biological mother or father.

Resources

For Co-parents

Families Change

Online resources for families dealing with separation or divorce with specific guides for parents, kids, and teens.

www.familieschange.ca.gov

HelpGuide.org

Co-parenting tips and strategies for divorced parents.

www.helpguide.org/family/parenting/co-parenting-tips-for-divorced-parents

OurFamilyWizard

This mobile app helps co-parents organize and navigate the many aspects of their parenting partnership – from expense tracking to parenting schedules.

https://www.ourfamilywizard.com

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For Our Children: Learning to Work Together

This informative PDF provides helpful information on conflict management, creating a parenting plan, and talking to your kids about divorce.

www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/files/child-support/Parenting%20Together/coparenting.pdf

Child Mind Institute

Find articles on shared parenting, parenting styles, and how to support your kids during your divorce.

https://childmind.org

For Children

Sesame Workshop

Kid-friendly videos and facts help you explain divorce to kids. Topics include adjusting to two homes, transitioning between parents, and dealing with big feelings.

https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/divorce

Changeville

An interactive, tour-style activity that informs children on the topics they'll encounter as their parents separate.

www.familieschange.ca.gov/en/kids/changeville

Kids In The Middle

This organization provides support and education to parents and children going through divorce or separation.

https://kidsinthemiddle.org

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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING

Raising children comes with challenges. When parents are separated, it can present even more struggles for everyone involved. Even if a child must split time between two homes, it's crucial that they see each parent as often as possible.

- Effective communication and conflict resolution
- Creating a co-parenting plan
- Co-parenting in blended families
- Self-care for co-parents



Photos used for illustrative purposes only; the people shown are not linked to the topic.

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