

GUIDELINES FOR CO-PARENTING WHEN SEPARATED OR DIVORCED

Hello! The following are some suggestions regarding how to remain positive parents after separating, since this is **the main factor in how children adjust**. The **conflict** between parents is the one thing all the research points to as being most harmful to children; **not divorce itself**. The marriage relationship has changed or ended, but that family will continue, and can be pretty great, no matter who else eventually may join. The greatest gift divorced parents can give their children is to take care of themselves, avoid exposing kids to continued conflict and hostility, and to work on continuing to meet kids' needs. The fact that you're reading this, shows that you're moving in the right direction!

Things to try to do:

- **Think of your co-parenting relationship as something *brand new* to be built from the ground up.** It's not your marriage.
- **It's good to have a regular routine to discuss problem solving and keep communication flowing regarding the children.** Keep one another informed so no details regarding the children fall through the cracks. Arrange a method, time or a place that is convenient. Limit discussion time to 30 minutes; when it goes longer emotions may get out of hand. Set ground rules that there will be no personal attacks or name calling. Write down any agreements that you make and make sure each parent has a copy.
- Continue to repeatedly assure children that you will both always love them. Do not assume they know. **Tell them again and again.**
- Talk to your kids **face to face** about their feelings about the situation. "Tell me how you're feeling about our arrangement. Is anything bothering you?" Their feelings are normal, legitimate, and ok. Let them know you both will make yourselves available should they want to talk about their feelings. They may brush you off several times but be there in case they don't. **Bad feelings are ok too; (anger, fear, worry.)**
- Continue to assure children that **they are not the cause** of the divorce. Very young children, and sometimes teenagers, believe the world revolves around them and might think they had the power to break up the marriage.
- Assure them that though sometimes the feelings between parents may change, the feelings between parents and children are very strong and never change. **That bond cannot be broken.** (No matter how badly behaved children may be at times.)
- Assure the children that you both will continue to take care of them and provide for them the best you can. These things may be need to be said repeatedly over the years. **Check in with them** regarding what they need from you.
- Let your kids know you are sorry for any **hurt/stress** the divorce process and **navigating their two households** has caused them. Acknowledge that they do have pain and grief. However, **don't let guilt motivate your parenting.**
- Maintain as much **consistency between homes** as you can. Rules, routines, etc. If limits aren't there, they may think you don't care about them. **Vast differences** between the two homes contribute to your child's sense of **instability.**

- Help ease transitions for your children by creating a private ritual, such as a secret handshake or going to a favorite restaurant for a “so long till next time” meal. Make plans together for your next visit. **Help them with packing and remembering items to bring;** this should not be their burden alone. Have **duplicate items** at each household whenever possible.
- Make sure your kids’ **teachers** know about your family’s arrangement, and any difficulties that may be happening in your family. A child that is upset and acting out regarding family issues may well be treated differently by teachers than a child that is just acting out. Groups at school may be helpful; they learn that many of their peers are in a similar situation.
- A parent should encourage the other **parent’s involvement in the children’s school** or other activities and advise of parent/teacher conferences, provide report cards and give other information pertaining to the welfare of the children.
- Allow children continued contact with **friends and relatives of both parents.**
- **Children should have time with their own friends/interests built into their time with each parent.** Consider it a 3-way sharing of the child’s time; children have a right to develop their own pursuits.
- Provide personal space at both homes for the children to call their own. Call each place his/her house not just mommy or daddy’s house. Provide privacy and boundaries when needed.
- A parent should assist children to buy **cards and gifts** for the other parent.
- Parents should negotiate with one another about changes in time sharing or responsibilities for the children that each parent will assume. **Negotiation requires give and take, not rigidity.**

Things to try to avoid:

- Never ask children to **take a side** between parents, or to dislike the other parent. It is very harmful to the child. Children know they are made up of both of you.
- Never make them afraid of hurting your feelings by loving their other parent. **Allow them the freedom to talk about and love the other parent** in your presence; have **pictures** of them in your house, etc. Never place the stress upon them of having to **mince their words.** Attend their special events together without them having to worry about which parent to run to afterward.
- Try not to be angry if your child wants to talk to their other parent during “your” parenting time. **Allow them free contact with each parent as needed.** This will help the child adjust to this new arrangement, and reduce anxiety.
- It’s never ok to make a **disparaging remark** about the other parent to the children, within their hearing, or within their experience (through you attitude/body language, etc.) If children complain about one parent, the other parent should encourage the child to take the complaint to the person responsible rather than agree with the children. A parent has no control over the other parent.
- It’s never ok to make your children **carry messages** between you. They’re not very good at it; they don’t like it, they may edit it if they’re not comfortable with it, or they may forget. This makes them the “bad guy.” It’s not their job as kids to communicate for the parents. It’s best to figure out some communication method of your own.

- It's never ok to **spy** on the other parent through the child. If you want to know what's happening at the other home, ask the other parent.
- It's never ok to play parenting time games. Kids don't keep score; they care more about their relationship with you than the "fairness of the time." **You will be parenting them over a lifetime; it will not always work out to rigidly adhere to any schedule.** It's the relationship that counts, not the time. If you start playing that game, kids will know you care more about "getting your time" rather than valuing the real closeness of your relationship with them. **Help them feel like a human being, not an object that is fought over.**
- Don't threaten legal action. A parent should not withhold the children from the other parent or refuse to pay child support. Children should not be used as weapons to get back at the other parent. See a mediator or therapist regarding issues.
- Don't discuss **financial matters** with the kids. If they ask about child support, help kids see the ways that they are being taken care of (shelter, lights, heat, food etc.) that they may not see as tangible "gifts" the money is being spent on. Take the 'high road' on this matter. Support the other parent.
- Do not expose children to **casual relationships** with members of the opposite sex. If a serious relationship develops, introduce the person slowly into the children's lives.
- *Don't believe that something negative is happening in the other parent's home simply because the children may be complaining, become withdrawn or act out when it is time to go between the parents' homes.* This behavior is usually normal. **Children go through an adjustment when getting ready to leave/visit each parent's home.** It can be tiring and stressful for some children to move back and forth. Younger children will not know how to clearly express their possibly confusing feelings; ie. both missing and excitement to see parent/s.

HOW COUNSELING CAN HELP:

Counseling can provide a private place for kids/parents to talk about feelings, gain support and coping skills and begin forming next steps. It can also provide a place for parents to gain skills in forming a new parenting relationship for their children, and work through issues that get in the way of doing so.

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Resources: *Support Through Divorce* by Erickson Mediation Institute, Bloomington, MN (ericksonmediation.com) and *The Good Divorce* (2004) by Constance Ahrons.