

Family Focus

Cooperative Co-parenting

You got married, had kids, shared a home and maybe even a pet—never planning or thinking it would end. It's unfortunate and difficult when your relationship doesn't work out and even worse when it ends on a bad note. But just because the relationship ends for you, doesn't mean your role as a parent does.

Every parent's greatest love is their child. It can be hard during separation or divorce to put kids first, but research shows that family dynamics are one of the most important factors affecting healthy child development. In fact, studies suggest that conflict is a critical factor in a child's adjustment to a separation or divorce. Painless co-parenting can be a reality by following the tips below and keeping in mind your common goal: your children's happiness.

Create a parenting plan. Set out rules on paper and save everyone stress, concern and trouble. Map out everything: from who cares for the children and when, to divvying up expenses. Be sure to respect all pre-arranged timelines and agreements. Many co-parenting websites offer clear parenting plan examples.

Put the kids first. Try to look at it from your children's perspective. Support and show enthusiasm for the great time your children share with your ex-partner. Support relationships with in-laws and step-siblings. For birthdays, sporting games and school events ensure you both attend, even if it means sitting separately.

Communicate. A big complaint about co-parenting is that one parent always feels out-of-the-loop depending on where the child is. Discipline, school events, concerns about development, and a flow of never-ending parental responsibilities need to be shared between both parents. Depending on your comfort level with your ex, communicate via e-mail, telephone or face-to-face. Set some ground rules—such as never putting each other down or talking negatively about one another's personal information—and agree to postpone the conversation until later if one or both of you gets angry or emotional.

Be consistent. Guilt and animosity can cause you and your ex-partner to overindulge your kids at a time when consistency is more critical than ever. And many children are wise to this. Keep rules, discipline, chores and schedules fair and consistent at both homes so that you create a united parenting front even when the other is absent. This will help kids feel secure and can prevent them from acting out or pitting parents against each other.

Choose battles carefully. In the past as a couple you may not have agreed on things and it's not likely you will now. Trust the other parent to make good decisions. What's cooking for dinner, whether your kids go out in t-shirts or long sleeves and playtime activities shouldn't become battlegrounds. If you have a problem, speak to the other parent in a neutral place without the kids present and discuss the issue in a non-accusing way.

Ask for help in decision making. Whether it's time for college or the fact that your five-year-old throws temper tantrums, it's wise and fair to consult the other parent on major issues.

Be positive. Try not to think of your former partner as your "ex" but as your child's mother or father. He or she will always be part of your life. And while any negative emotions you feel will subside, damage caused by a dysfunctional relationship and combative separation or divorce can be life-long for your child. Focus on the qualities you respect in your former partner and make an effort to remember the times when you did get along. If you have to minimize face-to-face contact to keep the peace, so be it. Providing your children with an environment where they feel safe, comfortable and loved is what's most important.

Separation or divorce can be the most difficult time of your life. Any anger, resentment or hurt you feel can push itself to the forefront of your mind. But push it away with thoughts of your children's wellbeing and never forget that this is a stressful and confusing time for them too. The more amicable and communicative both parents are, the more relaxed and less afraid your kids will be. By putting your children first, you and your ex-partner are sure to set the stage for successful co-parenting and a happier, healthier family dynamic.

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