

CO-PARENTING: LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER

Children need and deserve the love, care and support of both their parents. When parents separate, it is difficult for everyone involved, but it is especially hard for children. This tip sheet provides information for parents who live apart, but will need to work together to care for their children in positive and healthy environments.

What is Co-Parenting?

Co-parenting is when two parents work together to raise their children—even after their marriage or romantic relationship is over. Successful co-parenting may mean learning new skills, since co-parenting skills are not usually taught. Though it may be difficult at first, co-parenting is necessary for healthy child development and for helping children cope with many changes in their family life. It can be helpful to begin 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.

The following co-parenting tips may not work the same for every family, but parents can change them to fit their unique needs and circumstances.



Communicating With Your Child about the Break-up

When deciding to split up, both parents should talk to their children about the situation. Be honest about what is happening without sharing the details of your relationship's downfall. Continuously tell your children they **did not** cause the split. Stress how much you love them and that your love for them will not change. Let them know you are there for them during this difficult time. For some children, this may be enough comfort, while other children may benefit from professional counseling.

Communicating With the Other Parent

Communication with the other parent is a big part of your role as a co-parent. No matter what, communication with your ex is going to be a tough task. Remember that it isn't necessary to meet in person—speaking over the phone or exchanging emails is fine for the majority of conversations. The goal is conflict-free communication, so see which type of contact works best for you. Whether email, phone or in person, the following tips can help you and your ex to communicate in a positive and effective way for the sake of your children:

- **Set a business-like tone.** Approach the relationship with your ex as a business partnership where your “business” is your children’s healthy adjustment and well-being. Speak or write to your ex as you would a coworker—be polite, respectful and neutral.
- **Make requests.** Instead of making statements, which can sound like demands, try making requests. Requests can begin with “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 him or her that you’ve understood his or her point of view. Listening alone 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 learn to ignore the buttons he or she tries to push.
- **Commit to meeting/talking consistently.** Frequent communication with your ex will convey the message to your children that you and their other parent are a united front. This may be extremely difficult in the early stages of your divorce or separation.

- **Keep conversations kid-focused.** Remember, your child is part mom and part dad, so anything hurtful that is said to one another can affect your child's sense of their identity. Keep conversations focused on your child's activities, milestones, challenges and successes. Discussing these topics will help each parent take an active role in their child's life and let children know they are meaningful to each parent. Communicating with each other also helps parents double check what their children are saying. Some children in this situation tend to say things that are not true (i.e. "Dad says curse words are o.k" or "Mom thinks homework is a waste of time"). In these sticky situations, communication can help you uncover the truth.

Visiting the Other Parent

In the beginning, it is normal for children to feel frustrated, anxious, or unsure about visiting their other parent. Children feel better about the situation when they see their parents working together. Here are some tips to make these transitions as smooth as possible:

- **Help children feel good about visitation.** Children need to hear from both parents that spending time with the other parent is good for them. They need to know that it is alright to love each parent.
- **Help children anticipate change.** Make sure your children know the schedule of when they will be spending time with each parent. Consistency is the key to making this work.
- **Always drop off – never pick up.** It's a good idea to avoid "taking" your child from the other parent. Always dropping your child off at the other parent's house is less stressful for everyone. Avoid sending new girlfriends, boyfriends, or spouses to transport the children, or having them babysit for long periods of time. Children need and look forward this time with their parents.
- **Avoid using children as messengers.** Asking your children to transport bills, notes, or anything else can make them feel they are in the middle of their parents' relationship.
- **Aim for 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. These tips can help:

CREATE A PARENTING PLAN. This is a document that outlines certain parenting issues like: religion and church attendance, extracurricular activities and payment for these activities, medical treatment for the child, cell phones, internet access and restrictions, college saving, etc. More information concerning Parenting Plans can be found at: www.flcourts.org/core/fileparse.php/533/urlt/995a.pdf.

AGREE ON THE RULES. Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but if you and your ex establish generally consistent guidelines, your kids won't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments. Try to follow similar types of consequences for broken rules, even if the misbehavior 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.

- **Keep your issues to yourself.** Always avoid saying negative things about your ex in front of your children, or making them feel they have to choose between the two of you. Also avoid asking your children for information about their visit, or for information about the other parent. This can make their visit less enjoyable, and puts them in the middle of your adult relationship.

HERE'S HELP



Use the **Family Resources** on **pages 91–95** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.