

# CO-PARENTING DIVORCE GUIDE



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For most people, divorce is much more than a major legal process. It's also a challenging time of transition that can negatively impact virtually every area of life: emotional, psychological, domestic, parental, financial, physical health, social, vocational and more.

This special Co-Parenting Divorce Guide contains hand-picked articles, book excerpts, advice and more to help you become a successful co-parent to your children post-divorce.



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# Tips for Successful Co-Parenting

There are ways to make co-parenting more effective for both parents and easier on the kids. Here are some tips for successful cooperative parenting after divorce.

By Wendi Schuller, Therapist

**C**o-parenting is a relatively modern term in the divorce world. When my parents walked out of divorce court, they never communicated with each other ever again – about me or any other topic. Co-parenting implies cooperation and dialogue: former spouses are no longer partners in marriage, but are still partners in raising their children.

Today, divorcing parents have many more choices than the previous generation – or perhaps parents like mine simply did not see the need to discuss their children with each other post-divorce. Custody is usually joint, which means both parents have the right to decide what schools and activities their children will attend – and from time to time, they

## The “don’ts” of co-parenting can mostly be avoided by thinking about what is in the children’s best interests

will have to discuss issues and opportunities that arise in their children’s lives.

### How to Make Cooperative Parenting Easier

There are ways to make co-parenting easier – both for parents and for children. Consider having a regularly scheduled meeting, perhaps monthly, to discuss new issues or activities. Have an agenda, just as you would for a conference at work.

If one parent veers off course into blame, anger, or other toxic areas, calmly steer them back to the topic being discussed: “We were talking about Jane’s wish to change schools,” for example. Keep emotion out of the discussion, and treat the other parent as you would an excitable co-worker: with calm, but firm, courtesy. These meetings don’t have to be in person if it is difficult to be in your ex’s presence. Using Skype or the phone is fine, even if they only live a few streets away.

Co-parenting is easier when both parents are on the same page and don’t feel left out of anything. There are various online calendars and apps (such as [www.OurFamilyWizard.com](http://www.OurFamilyWizard.com)) that let each parent view and add activities or events in the youngsters’ lives – such as dance recitals, sports tournaments, and school concerts – as well as track parenting time. Add these to a shared schedule as soon as you know about them; that way, one parent cannot blame the other one for not notifying them about an important event in their children’s lives. Remember to keep grandparents up-to-date on the kids’ events so they can attend, if possible.

Some parents have a notebook that goes back and forth between homes, which is particularly helpful with young children. For instance, if a child has an asthma attack or a severe allergic reaction to food, you can make a note of it, letting your co-parent know when an inhaler or EpiPen was administered. This also is useful for medical conditions like seizures. If there are incidents at school or other information that needs to be relayed, the notebook is another method of both sharing and recording the details.

### Consistency and Teamwork

An important part of co-parenting is setting up consistent rules, routines, and consequences in both homes. Kids require constancy in their topsy-turvy world. Going to bed and eating meals at vastly different times is like having chronic jet lag. They feel more secure with a routine, and it is better for their physical and mental well-being. This also avoids pitting one parent against the other one; you won’t have to deal with “Dad lets me go to bed at 11” or “Mom lets me watch TV all day.” When kids realize that their parents are on the same team – even

though they no longer live in the same home – and that the rules are consistent in both homes, then they are less likely to try and get away with things.

Work together when dividing up holidays. Some parents each have the kids for part of the special day, and others trade holidays on alternate years. There may be new step-siblings, who also have to share holidays with another parent, to work into your holiday schedules. Some co-parents have a get-together with new partners and grandparents and do okay in each other’s company. See what works best in your situation.

### If Co-Parenting Is Difficult...

The “don’ts” of co-parenting can mostly be avoided by thinking about what is in the children’s best interests. Yes, it is hard to put your ego aside or not to consider punishing your ex by “forgetting” to enter the dates of the school play on your shared electronic calendar. Getting back at an ex through the children is not healthy and can backfire. One father took his sons to a show during the divorce that he knew his wife would get angry about. The boys – who were upset seeing an adult-themed play with scantily-clad women – told the interim psychologist, who put a stop to this behavior. Later, they discussed this and more events with the custody evaluator; the mother ended up with physical custody and the father was not granted any overnight visitation.

If co-parenting is difficult, consider having a third party handle all communication between you. One woman had her friend edit out any mean comments from her ex-husband’s emails and then forward them to her. Others have used a mediator or some other professional to take care of all messages and communication between co-parents.

Technology can help. For instance, the Message Board on the “Our Family Wizard” website and app has a feature called “ToneMeter.” Described as an “emotional spell-check,” ToneMeter helps you identify and flag emotionally-charged sentences within your message and adjust the overall tone.

The bottom line is that co-parenting is a learning process and generally gets easier as time goes by – especially if parents are able to check their egos and put their children first. ■



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# Designing a Parenting Plan

Important issues you should consider as you design your parenting plan.

By Dr. Donald A. Gordon  
and Dr. Jack Arbuthnot

**V**irginia Satir, a well-known psychologist in the family and divorce field, once said, “Parents are teachers of human beings, not owners of human beings.” This is a wise view to keep in mind when creating your parenting plan. Children need the love and affection of both parents, but they also need both as teachers. These roles should override your desire to “own” your children. Ultimately, you cannot own them: you can only prepare them for their future. How well you prepare them will ultimately reflect your qualities as parents.



Another well-known expert in this field, Joan Kelly, has observed that, “It is not the divorce per se, but the conditions and agreements the parents create during and after the divorce that will determine the child’s adjustment.” The marriage is over, as are your lives as Mom and Dad parenting under the same roof. You will begin new lives as Mom and Dad parenting apart.

There are three basic types of living arrangements for children: sole custody, split custody, and shared custody. The most common is sole custody, in which one parent becomes the resident parent while the other has “reasonable access.” About 70% of all parenting plans result in the mom being the resident parent – although the number of fathers becoming the resident parent increases with income.

### **The Language of Parenting Plans**

Most parents say they want to “win custody” of the kids. This suggests control – or possession – of the children is the goal. Instead, your goal should be to work out the best parenting plan for your children, so call it a parenting plan rather than a custody battle. The child may be in one parent’s home more than the other; refer to that person as the “primary residential parent,” not as the “custodial parent.” The other parent should be viewed as the “secondary residential parent,” not someone who just has visitation rights. No caring and involved parent wants to just “visit” his or her kids.

In split parenting plans custody of the children is divided: one or more child/ren may go to one parent, and the other child/ren the other; boys often go to fathers and girls to mothers. However, this is rare in initial separation decrees, and it generally only happens when there are unusual circumstances. It may occur when a child is old enough to choose which parent they wish to live with (age 12 in some jurisdictions). Many people believe it is a bad idea to separate siblings, but there isn’t enough good research to corroborate this.

In shared parenting, both parents share legal control of the children. Shared decision-making does not mean shared time, which can vary from equal time (50/50) with each parent to 60/40 or even 65/35. With shared parenting, the children may live primarily with one parent but they may spend more time with the other parent than is normal in a non-shared parenting arrangement. The parent with whom the child lives most is called the primary residential parent, and the other is called the secondary residential parent.

In most areas, shared parenting is presumed to be the best plan for children. Judges must provide a strong reason if they wish to order some other arrangement; in some areas, judges have the authority to order shared parenting if they believe it would be best for the child, or if one parent requests it.

Many judges require parents to develop a parenting plan before granting a divorce. Conflict between the parents can be minimized by a written plan stating specific dates and times when each is in charge of the child; because everything is in writing, there is less need for parents to negotiate or argue. Adherence to the plan will increase trust between the parents and encourage them to cooperate in the future.

### **Guiding Questions for Parenting Plans**

There are several important issues you should think about as you design your parenting plan. Ask yourself:

1. What goals for our children do we both share?
2. How will we continue to be effective parents in separate households?
3. Do I only want to resolve our legal matters, or also our family issues?
4. How do we want our children to look back on this time and on our behavior as parents?

You need to spend time talking about what goals you have for your children, what their childhood should be like, what you want them to be like both as children and adults, and what each of you can contribute to these goals. Write it down on paper and share it with your children; they’ll know that you both care about them, and they’ll see that you’re working together for their welfare. Set an example of cooperation – even though it may be a heroic effort.

Parenting is difficult under the most ideal circumstances, and it is more of a challenge when done from two households. Plan how you will coordinate your efforts: plan for the big issues (like school, religion, etc.), and plan for the small, day-to-day stuff (such as transportation, parties, etc.). You should set up regular meetings, emails, or phone calls to catch up on important developments, work out schedules, and discuss concerns.

Your parenting plan will spell out conditions and terms – some of which can be legally enforced. Take the time to design a good, flexible plan. Someday, as young adults, your children will look back on their childhood and judge how well you both handled this difficult time. They will look at how you cooperated, and they’ll remember if you put their interests ahead of your “marital issues.”

### **Frequency of Contact with Each Parent**

The amount of time children should spend with each parent is one of the most fought-over issues in a family break-up. It is also the most misunderstood by all involved – including parents, lawyers, and judges. As a result, parenting plans are often flawed, which can cause a great deal of emotional suffering for children.

There has been much psychological research on children’s attachment to their parents, and the most recent

## Unfortunately, a concept of stability – one home, one bed – for children still prevails.

findings are clear: children – particularly young children – need frequent and meaningful contact with both parents. A young child becomes deeply attached to both parents at a very early age; to be separated from either parent causes distress and can even cause trauma.

Young children need frequent transitions to ensure continuity and provide comfort. This goes against what many people assume is “common sense”, and many parents, lawyers, and judges misunderstand this fact. Although quality of contact is more important than quantity, there must be enough quantity. Infants and toddlers form bonds with both parents, and extended separations put these bonds at risk over time. Fathers, especially, are likely to drop out of the child’s life. If court orders restrict the father’s access to a young child, it may cause a decline in contact with the father over time. This decline in contact can also happen with the mother.

The ideal situation for young children is to interact with both parents daily. Some interaction is functional, including meals, bedtime routines, limit-setting, discipline, and play. After age two, most children can tolerate two back-to-back overnights with one parent. Avoid long separations lasting more than five days.

Frequent contact will mean more transitions from one house to the other. Many people – including some judges – automatically assume this is bad. They assume that frequent transitions will upset a child, and should be avoided. But there is evidence to the contrary: even a young child will get used to frequent transitions if they are not too stressful.

Unfortunately, a concept of stability – one home, one bed – for children still prevails. The concept has been emphasized too much in many courts, and it is to the detriment of the child’s other needs. They need strong and meaningful relationships with both parents, and most children adapt quickly to having two homes.

Research points out that less frequent transitions may cause more stress. Children must leave the home they have been in for a week or more, and they must also leave their second parent and go “home” with the prospect of not seeing the second parent for a long time. Frequent transitions between homes eliminate this problem.

### Outlining the Issues

You must discuss the parenting plan for your child, and both parents must be clear about the issues. What assumptions should you start with? Here are the major issues that most parents face:

1. A child needs two loving, caring, competent parents.
2. Both parents have a right to an active role in their child’s development.
3. Both parents must be willing to share in the tasks of parenthood.
4. Conflict and competition over the children will hurt both them and you.

Your parenting plan should be specific; this way, everyone is clear about what will happen and when. Here are some reasons to be as specific as possible:

1. Children need predictability.
2. Parents will experience less conflict if plans are specific.
3. It is easier to recognize when a plan needs to be modified if its terms are clearly spelled out in detail.
4. The time and energy of the courts and lawyers will be better used if a plan is specific. It will result in fewer phone calls in the middle of the night, and fewer court filings.

Finally, recognize that no plan is perfect, and most plans need to change over time as children develop and their lives and needs change.

### Flexibility Is Essential

Although parenting plans need to be specific to minimize conflict and misunderstandings, be aware that situations – and people – change over time. For most families, anger will diminish over time. Parents usually remarry or re-couple, and stepchildren may enter the picture. And, of course, your own children will age and mature. Their interests will change, and the need for parental input in their lives will also change.

A parenting plan should not be carved in stone. It is not an unchanging document, and you should be prepared to modify it over time. The truly wise mother and father can sometimes anticipate some future changes, which could be built into the original court decree. However, few of us are able to predict the future, so be prepared to work with the other parent. You’ll have to make changes when necessary, and the best way to do this is by mutual agreement.

If you cannot create a parenting plan yourselves, work with a mediator, parenting expert, or other third party. Put into your plan that you both agree to mediate before court action. ■



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*Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation has on children.*

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# Making Co-Parenting EASIER



You can ease the challenge of co-parenting with an ex-spouse by planning ahead and seeking professional help if necessary. Here are five tips to help make co-parenting easier post-divorce.

By Brian James

**W**hen parents divorce, it is the beginning of a new partnership in co-parenting their children. Co-parenting goes much more smoothly when there is a plan in place; it assures that no matter how you feel about your ex-spouse, the children's interests will come first.

It's important to determine if you and your ex-spouse are comfortable enough to communicate directly about co-parenting issues regarding the children. If you're able to talk through things on your own, that's terrific; however, if you find it too difficult, don't feel frustrated. Mediators and therapists can help you to discuss co-parenting issues that you may have trouble talking about on your own.

Here are five keys to making post-divorce co-parenting easier:

## **1. Put Your Co-Parenting Plan in Writing in the Divorce Agreement.**

The more you lay out parenting terms in writing, the less room there is for disagreement down the road. A little pre-planning can save you court battles and lawyer fees later.

## **2. Decide Who Will Pay for Which Expenses in Advance.**

Rather than splitting every cost as it comes up, try to divide who will pay for which expenses ahead of time. For instance, the father may choose to cover football expenses for the son, while the mother agrees to cover the piano lessons for the daughter. Again, if you have a hard time dividing this up on your own, a divorce mediator or parenting coordinator can help you.

## **3. Discuss the Best Ways to Have the Kids Meet New Romantic Partners.**

This issue is easier to discuss before there is actually

someone new in the picture. Having an agreement on parent-dating etiquette in your divorce agreement can save a lot of problems down the road.

## **4. Hold Regular Meetings to Stay on Track.**

Regular meetings (in-person, over the phone, or via email) allow both parents to stay up-to-date with new situations as they arise with the kids.

## **5. It's Okay to Ask for Professional Help.**

Don't feel badly if you need a professional to help you work out your co-parenting differences. When tensions run high, it can be hard to put feelings aside and make decisions. Hiring a mediator can help you get back on track and focus on how to help your kids in the situation. Having parents stand together on a parenting front can bring a huge amount of security to the kids.


No one ever said that working together as a team to parent your children after divorce would be easy. Both spouses need to be dedicated to their role as parents and willing to compromise. Hiring a mediator can help parents make the children a top priority. It's very common for parents to have disagreements after divorce when terms are not mapped out in the divorce agreement and they are having trouble communicating calmly. When one is needed, a trained mediator can help parents get past the emotions at hand and find solutions that truly are best for their children. ■

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# Is it Possible to Co-Parent with a Narcissistic Ex-Spouse?

By Terry Gaspard, Licensed Therapist

Co-parenting with a difficult ex-spouse can be challenging to say the least. Here are eight strategies for dealing with a narcissistic, challenging, or high-conflict co-parent.

**If** one of the reasons why your marriage ended was due to your spouse being a narcissist, you probably hoped that things would get better for you and your children after your divorce. In many ways they might have since your daily life is no longer filled with turmoil. However, many parents who try co-parenting with a narcissistic ex-spouse soon realize it doesn't work any better than being married to them.

One of the most crucial things to keep in mind post-divorce when you were married to a narcissist or challenging ex is to set good boundaries. It's also important to abandon any thought of co-parenting successfully because you *can't* co-parent with someone who is self-absorbed. After all, the premise of a co-parenting plan is cooperation and the commitment to putting your children's needs first which is impossible for a narcissist.

What is the solution for parents who want to co-parent with an ex who is narcissistic or challenging? According to Dr. Edward Kruk, Ph.D., “Parallel parenting is an arrangement in which divorced parents are able to co-parent by means of disengaging from each other, and having limited contact in situations where they have demonstrated that they are unable to communicate with each other in a respectful manner.”

Parallel parenting allows parents to remain disengaged from one another (and have a parenting plan) while they remain close to their children. For instance, they remain committed to making responsible decisions (medical, education, etc.) but decide on the logistics of day-to-day parenting separately.

Here are eight strategies for dealing with a narcissistic, challenging, or high-conflict co-parent.

## 1. Set Firm Boundaries for Your Kids

Since their life with their other parent is unpredictable, you will have to provide stability. High-conflict personalities thrive on the possibility of combat. Be prepared and write a script to use when talking to him/her and try to stick to it, using as few words as possible. For instance, if he/she tries to persuade you to change the parenting plan, say something like: “I’m not comfortable with this idea. I’m sure you have good intentions, but this won’t work for me.”

## 2. Limit Your Contact with Your Ex

Don’t take frequent calls from your children when they are with the other parent (unless there is an emergency). If you speak often, your ex might react in an angry way toward your kids or put you down in front of them.

## 3. Be the Parental Role Model Your Kids Need to Thrive

Show compassion toward your children and don’t bad-mouth their other parent in their presence. Children are vulnerable to experiencing loyalty conflicts and shouldn’t be in the middle between their parents. Be aware of your tone and facial expressions during interactions with your ex in front of your kids.

## 4. Keep Your Eye on the Big Picture in Terms of Your Children’s Future

Although it’s stressful trying to deal with a difficult ex, remember that your children will be more resilient if you put your frustration and “emotional baggage” aside for their sake. Adopt realistic expectations and pat yourself on the back for working at this challenging relationship for your kids.

## 5. Focus on the Only Thing You Can Control – Your Own Behavior!

You alone are responsible for your reactions to your ex’s comments and behavior. But don’t be persuaded by your ex to do something that you’re uncomfortable with just to keep the peace. Adopt a business-like “just the facts, ma’am” style of communicating with him/her.

## 6. Don’t Become Emotional or Apologize to Your Ex

Don’t express genuine emotion to your ex or apologize for wrongdoing in the relationship. If your ex is a perilous or abusive narcissist, they might interpret your apology as proof of your incompetence and use it against you, according to Virginia Gilbert, Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT).

## 7. Make Sure Your Parenting Plan Is Structured and Highly Specific

Spell out schedules, holidays, vacations, etc. to minimize conflict. Using a communication notebook to share important details with your ex can be an essential tool to help you stay detached and business-like. Check out websites and articles on parallel parenting.

## 8. Seek Help from Counselors, Mediators, or Other Supportive Professionals

Make sure you have plenty of support from a lawyer, friends, family, and a therapist. Use a third-party mediator when needed. Educate yourself about strategies to deal with a difficult or high-conflict ex. Therapists who utilize cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) are usually the most successful in dealing with survivors of a relationship with an ex who has a personality disorder.

In many cases, co-parenting is a wonderful opportunity for children of divorce to have close to equal access to both parents – to feel close to both of their parents. However, few experts discuss the drawbacks of co-parenting when one parent is hands-off, has a high-conflict personality, or a personality disorder such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

It’s essential that you take an honest look at the effect your ex’s behaviors and the dynamics in your co-parenting relationship are having on you and your children. Once you accept that you can only control your own behavior – not a person with a difficult or high-conflict personality – your life will greatly improve. After all, you and your children deserve to have a life filled with love and happiness! ■



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# Successful Co-Parenting Communication after Divorce

In order to "normalize" the post-divorce co-parenting situation as much as possible, you need to make all communication clear – with your children and with your ex-spouse.

By Jeffrey Cottrill

Generally speaking, when one thinks of the ideal environment for raising children, it's the loving, two-parent model that comes to mind. But in the real world, many parents get divorced and have to continue raising their kids while living in two homes. And while it may be true that you can no longer live with your ex-spouse, this does not reduce the importance of both of you raising your children the best possible way under the circumstances.

Obviously, things are going to be different from now on. Your children need to continue to have stable relationships with both of you – even while you're living separately. "The relationship has changed from marriage to divorce, so you must make accommodations. You need to clarify explicit boundaries and new rules," says therapist Irene Schatz, Ph.D., who co-runs a co-parenting mediation practice, Collaborative Divorce Consultants, in south Florida. "Some



divorced people continue to parent by themselves and end up doing what's called 'parallel parenting,' where the couple has two different schedules and rules." However, this can cause problems when the separate schedules and rules contradict each other. "When there's no collaboration, you're not co-parenting."

Effective parenting after divorce requires effective communication – both between the co-parents and between the parents and children. Even if they don't like each other, or disagree on many issues, divorced parents still have to work together as a team as far as their children are concerned. In addition, the lines should always be open for the children to express their thoughts and feelings and to be aware of the new rules and boundaries. Everybody should know what's going on. With stronger co-parenting communication, there will be less chance of misunderstandings and conflicts between the ex-spouses – and a better chance of a healthy upbringing for the children.

## Communicating with Your Ex During and After Divorce

It's not hard to see that the adjustment from an intact family to two separate co-parenting homes will be extremely awkward at best. So it's essential to make the transition as smooth as possible for the children. A frequent barrier to successful post-divorce parenting is when parents give in to the conflict that split them up in the first place. "To achieve a collaborative status between co-parents, you need to learn to devise strategies for conflict management," Dr. Schatz says. "Otherwise, the child gets caught in the middle. Conflict is often the culprit: children are exposed to the conflict, and it creates long-term psychological-adjustment problems."

Continued open fighting or resentment between co-parents creates a negative, uncomfortable environment for your child and undermines any attempt to forge a stable routine in custody and visitation. It also makes you and your ex poor role models for your child's social and communication skills. Hostility makes co-parents work against, rather than with, each other: sometimes, they use the kids as messengers, or they withhold support or visitation in order to punish the other parent. Rather than being a focused parent who acts for the kids' sake, it's really a way of excusing yourself from your co-parenting responsibilities.

"One of the biggest mistakes is that people end up, under the condition of fear, focusing on things in life they can't control, and that paralyzes their power as parents," says Jeffrey P. Wittman, Ph.D., a family therapist and mediator in Albany, NY and author of *Custody Chaos, Personal Peace: Sharing Custody with an Ex Who Drives You Crazy* (Berkley, 2001). "Every moment a parent spends trying to get the ex to change or act differently is a moment lost with the children."

So put aside your differences and get together on what the new rules, boundaries, and methods are going to be. "You

should work hard at sticking to a schedule," says Montreal divorced dad Phil Clavel, the author of *Dad Alone* (Vehicule Press, 2003), a guide for divorced fathers. "Keep it consistent, so that the kids know there's a routine, as opposed to surprise visits or changes." And keep in touch to make sure everybody knows what's going on with the routine. "Make sure there's a freedom to phone each other; don't overdo it, but do it for checks and verification. Schedule times; ask each other about activities you should be aware of."

"The challenge is to find a way to communicate with one another in the context of a business relationship," says Dr. Wittman. "This helps people to rise above their more primitive emotions, with a compassionate focus on what the child needs. It helps parents rediscover their power. The fastest way to peace is to focus away from getting your ex to be different and on a way to be better to the children."

Sometimes it may be tempting to blame your co-parent right away when something goes wrong. This may be a result of any ongoing tension you may still have with him or her, as well as your protective instincts for your children. But resist the impulse to overreact and jump to conclusions. Examine the situation first from all sides: maybe it's not as urgent or important as you think. "You have to have faith in the other parent," says Clavel. "You may not have done well as a couple, but as parents, you have to have faith. The ex is not going to be in the house any longer, so develop a trust level. They could be making the right decisions, for all you know. Both parents should be on the same page."

If you strongly suspect that there's a problem with your ex-spouse's parenting, or if you disapprove of certain actions, don't broach the subject in a hostile way. "Express your complaint not as a character slam but as a worry about the kids," says Dr. Wittman. "That way, you're less likely to get the other person's back up. Be specific about the worries you have and what your ex should do differently. Don't slam the other person's character or refer to past problems. Focus on the present and emphasize the things that worry you about the children."

So accept that you and your ex will continue working together – and do what you can to keep your post-divorce relationship civil and open. "Sometimes the co-parenting relationship will be happy, sometimes not, and you have to expect that," says Dr. Schatz. "Accept that there will be highs and lows. It's so important to put the child's priorities first."

## Communicating with Your Kids During and After Divorce

Both co-parents and the children must be equally clear about the rules and schedules. Their reactions to the new rules will vary according to their age and temperament: older children may be averse to sudden changes to a family situation they've been accustomed to as long as they remember, while others are too young to understand what's going on and become

used to the separate-parents environment as they age. On the other hand, because divorce is more commonplace today than ever before, the kids may be more hip to the situation than you think. Hopefully, you know your children well enough to anticipate their reactions and have a plan for dealing with them.

Be aware that the transition from one to two homes can be confusing and frightening from a child's point of view. "One common issue in the early months following separation is that the child's reluctant to go to the other parent's home, when that parent has moved to an apartment or someplace else," says Clavel. "It's a comfort for the kids to be in the original home, and they may not want to leave it. Kids should know when they will be with each parent, although both parents should also be available for emergencies."

Having a calendar in both homes with the days a child will spend with each parent clearly marked can help the child feel more secure. For younger children, use different colors for days spent with Mom and days with Dad, and make sure they're aware of when a transition is going to occur.

forcing you into the role of "Bad Cop." Again, don't jump to conclusions. "Remember that children go through different stages and may get along better with one parent at different ages and stages," says Clavel. "The other parent may be more tolerant of certain actions, and some kids will play on that: 'Mom said I could do this.' Once they're told 'no' by both parents, they'll stop it." In these cases, it's not so much a matter of one child getting along better with the other parent – "it's just 'what's in it for me.'"

"It's very common that one parent gets along better with a child than the other does," says Dr. Schatz. "But if the child knows that the parents are working together, they'll have an equal relationship."

"You're a parent first and a divorced parent second, so don't let the divorce play a significant role in your decision-making," says Clavel. "Make decisions as a mom or dad, not as a divorced mom or dad." No matter how angry or upset you may still be about the divorce, be careful what you say when small ears may be listening. You don't want to give your children the mistaken impression that they were to

**It's dangerous to speak derogatorily about your ex when your kids can hear (even if what you say is true) because that will put your children in a loyalty bind and could make them feel bad about themselves.**

The children's best interests should be the first priority – so be sure you and your ex know what they are. "I would always encourage a parent to sit down and listen to a child," Dr. Schatz advises. Pay attention to what your kids tell you – both in their words and actions. You'll find out what it is they really want and need from you and your co-parent – and if there are any problems with the current system.

If your child is acting differently, as if something is bothering him or her, ask your child what's wrong – but in a gentle way that shows you're not going to make any judgments. "Parents sometimes forget the power of sitting down with a child and asking, 'where did we go wrong?' and talking about it," says Dr. Wittman. Always be empathetic with your child, as well as with your co-parent: try to see the situation from the other person's point of view before making any decisions or judgments.

Children should be encouraged to have strong relationships with both parents. But sometimes, it may appear that your child may be favoring the other parent over you. You may think that the other parent is spoiling the child and

blame for the breakup ("If only I had cleaned up my room/gotten better grades/didn't get sick on vacation, Mom and Dad would have stayed together").

Your ex is a parent to your child as much as you are – no matter how much you disagree with him or her. When there's tension between you and your ex, you may want your child to take your side – which will put an extreme strain on his/her loyalty. It's also dangerous to speak derogatorily about your ex when your kids can hear (even if what you say is true) because that will put your children in a loyalty bind and could make them feel bad about themselves. If you tell them their father's a "no-good bum," your children may end up thinking that they're no-good bums, too: after all, they have to have inherited something from both parents.

"Kids generally love both parents and want to be around them," Clavel continues. "Talking negatively about the other compounds the problem – in the long term for the child and in the short term for the targeted parent. Some adults whose parents divorced still resent it when one parent talks negatively about the other."

“One critical problem is that parents get so immersed in their own feelings of hurt and rage that the child gets forgotten,” says Dr. Wittman. “When the parents live in different houses, everybody experiences anxiety. It’s tragic that people are so hurt that they lose the ability to honor the other parent’s role in the child’s life. They’re so immersed in it that the other person is viewed as an enemy or substantially flawed human being, and that puts the child in a bind. The child goes to the home of somebody who may have been defined as flawed.” Your ex may no longer be your spouse, but he or she is your child’s parent for life, so don’t sabotage that relationship.

Remember that children read verbal messages and body language differently than adults do – usually with more naivete and literal interpretation – so make sure you think before you speak, and that your body language doesn’t contradict what you’re saying.

### Common-Sense Co-Parenting After Divorce

“Parents sometimes lose sight of the fact that they’re divorced as a marriage but not as a family,” says Dr. Schatz. “They’ll

be co-parenting for life through events such as birthdays, weddings, and graduations. When they know they’re in this for the long run, they’re much more motivated to have good communication.”

Good communication among everybody involved – the parents and the children – involves both passing on information and paying attention. Always consider the consequences of the messages you get across, intentionally or not, and make sure you’re always attuned to everybody else’s wants and needs. One way to make sure you don’t sabotage your co-parenting relationship is to ask yourself, “What result do I want from this communication?” before opening your mouth. Unless your answer is “To totally burn all my bridges and make sure my ex will never cooperate with me again,” you will refrain from being rude, sarcastic, or accusatory when communicating with him/her. Above all, remember that your children’s welfare must always be your first priority. Think about the long-term effects on your children of everything you and your ex say and do, and you can create the best possible co-parenting situation. ■

## Communicating with Your Kids: Do’s and Don’ts

Here are some of the biggest “Do’s and Don’ts” regarding communicating with your kids after divorce.

### Do’s:

- Listen. Be aware of any concerns or problems the children may have.
- Encourage them to have a strong relationship with your ex.
- Keep them aware of the parenting schedules and routines.
- Encourage them to talk openly with you about their feelings and thoughts.
- Reassure them that you will always love them.

### Don’ts:

- Try to manipulate your children into siding with you.
- Badmouth your ex in your kids’ earshot.
- Use your kids to spite your ex or as messengers to him or her.
- Make your children feel as if they were to blame for the breakup.
- Put conflict with your ex ahead of the kids’ best interests.
- Assume everything’s all right with them without making sure first.

## Communicating with Your Ex Do’s and Don’ts

Here are some of the biggest “Do’s and Don’ts” regarding communicating with your co-parent after divorce.

### Do’s:

- Have clear, consistent schedules and rules.
- Keep each other abreast of any parenting-related developments or important issues.
- Schedule appointments to speak with your ex about any problems, then be polite but firm while trying to solve them.
- Develop a trust level between each other – this means being 100% trustworthy yourself.
- Be civil and reasonable at all times.

### Don’ts:

- Let any conflict with your ex overtake your parenting responsibilities.
- Assume your ex will go along with everything you plan or suggest.
- Jump to conclusions or overreact if you think there’s a problem.
- Begin sentences with phrases such as “You always...” or “You never...”



# Tips for Healthy Co-Parenting with a Toxic Ex

Co-parents need to develop a healthy relationship post-divorce for the well-being of their children. Unfortunately, this may be easier said than done after a bitter divorce.

Dr. Tarra Bates-Duford, Forensic Psychologist

**M**ost of us are aware of the challenges that go along with the breakdown of the family when partners divorce. Once a couple decides to divorce, many issues and questions arise that had never been previously contemplated by the couple, such as who gets custody of the children, how to divide the marital property, finances, etc.

The process of divorcing one's spouse can be extremely difficult in and of itself. However, when you combine the process of divorce with custody and other parenting issues, the process can become much more challenging. For many dueling spouses, the process of separating themselves from their marital partners and maintaining a parental relationship with their children can be a tricky balancing act.

Once the divorce is finalized and each parent is living in separate environments, one parent might still be consumed with anger, hurt or resentment, making it difficult to move past the divorce. Some parents find it tough to separate negative feelings about a former spouse without including their children, forcing them to choose sides between their parents.

## Toxic Co-Parenting Usually Follows a Bitter Divorce

Unfortunately, once parents engage in a battle to pollute their children's feelings about the other parent, toxic co-parenting usually follows. As parents we all wonder how children will respond to a divorce once we have made the decision to end a marriage.

We often wonder if our children will hate us, blame us for the divorce, or will have a difficult time adjusting to a one-parent household. Our main priority as parents, divorced or not, is to ensure that our kids have a happy, healthy, stable and balanced life. But for many divorcing or divorced parents, emotions run high and conflict with our former spouse feels unavoidable.

For some couples it is not easy to separate when you share a child with someone and both parties desire and intend to remain an active part of the child's life. While the process of a divorce usually signals an end to the intimate relationship between the parents, there is still a co-parenting relationship that needs to continue when there are children involved.

Parents need to develop a healthy relationship post-divorce for the sake and well-being of their children. It is essential for the child's emotional and psychological health that each parent behaves respectfully toward each other and does not try to interfere with or undermine the child's relationship with the other parent.

Here are 7 tips for successful parenting when a toxic ex is involved:

### 1. Avoid speaking negatively about the other parent to the child

Do not speak negatively of the other parent to the child or speak in an unflattering way about the other parent when the child is around. Although some divorces can be contentious with understandably hurt feelings and anger, children should be protected at all times from emotional pain. Both parents are required to provide a safe, secure, and healthy emotional support network.

### 2. Identify what is most important to you as a parent

Creating a healthy partnership with the other parent reduces the likelihood of making a child feel he or she needs to pick a side between the parents. Children should be reassured that although parents no longer love each other romantically they still have some degree of love and respect for the other parent because they share children.

### 3. Support communication between your child and ex-spouse

Recognize that your child needs to have ongoing access

and communication with both parents. Don't avoid communicating with the other parent about any issues pertaining to the children. Each parent should have an honest and loving relationship with their children, so be sure what you are saying to your children about respecting the other parent matches how you speak and behave toward the other parent.

### 4. Consider the other parent when making decisions about your child

Parents are encouraged to consider the other parent's point of view whenever parental decisions need to be made. Remember both parents love the children equally, so it is only fair that you listen without judgement to any of their parenting suggestions and concerns. After all, if you're initiating the concern, consider what the other co-parent might be thinking or reacting to what you are saying.

### 5. Learn to identify what triggers negative reactions from your ex

By identifying what triggers negative behaviors, former spouses can begin the process of healing from the divorce and becoming more effective parents. By knowing what upset you about a former spouse, you can develop options to manage your responses to the triggers.

### 6. Do not provide your child detailed reasons for your divorce

It is only natural for children to question their parents about the reasons leading to their divorce; however, the explanation should not include blaming the other parent, cheating, the other parent no longer wanting to be a family, etc. Simple explanations such as, "we decided we did not want to remain married, but we are still a family," answers the child's question without assigning blame.

### 7. Respect your children's relationship with the other parent

Be encouraging and avoid interfering. Divorce is not only confusing for spouses but for children as well. Children need to know that even if their parents are no longer together, the parents' love towards the children remains and has not been changed or affected by the divorce. ■



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# 3 Secrets to Successful Parallel Parenting

Co-parenting with an uncooperative ex-spouse is harmful for you and your children. Learn how to begin parallel parenting successfully and minimize the negative impacts felt by your children.

By Karen McMahon, Divorce Coach



Once the divorce is final, children will blossom most through healthy co-parenting. Studies have shown that it is the conflict more so than the divorce that causes psychological harm to our children. Co-parenting involves creating a collaborative, mutually respectful partnership for the sake of the children. It includes communication, cooperation, flexibility, joint decision making, mutual support of the other parent with the children, and most importantly, child-centered decision making.

However, many divorces are contentious and subsequent parenting is fraught with antipathy. If these rules on healthy co-parenting seem impossible and leave you wondering how to navigate your post-divorce parenting reality, you may need to adjust your approach to co-parenting. In fact, it is not only unrealistic but can damage both you and your children to attempt to co-parent when mutual cooperation is unfeasible.

### What Is Parallel Parenting?

Parallel Parenting is a style of co-parenting best suited for those who have experienced a high-conflict divorce, or if you are parenting with an ex who is abusive, struggles with addiction, or has a mental illness such as narcissism, bipolar, schizophrenia, or other personality disorders. In these situations, parallel parenting may be your only option.

Parallel parenting involves accepting the limitations of your ex and creating the healthiest parenting situation for your children. This approach includes less communication between parents and fewer shared celebrations, events, and activities. During negotiations, you are well-served to negotiate for sole decision making, if possible, to avoid conflict. Plan for a lack of flexibility with the custody schedule as well. Parallel parenting is not easy; it requires personal dedication, external encouragement, and experienced support.

Finally, create a healthy support system of fellow parents who can both support and help you through the challenges of single parenting.

### 3 Secrets of Successful Parallel Parenting

#### 1 Communication MUST be unemotional and business-like.

- Bill Eddy created an acronym that is incredibly helpful. BIFF stands for Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm. Keep to the facts. Share only needed information.
- Don't be rude but do be concise. Know your purpose for communicating and state it firmly.

#### 2 Use an online parenting app.

There are many options for online scheduling such as OurFamilyWizard.com enable you to share schedules, expenses, and communication in a safe, and structured setting. Communication can't be altered and professionals can be invited in to help settle conflicts.

#### 3 Turn conflicts into life lessons.

When your children struggle with or are hurt by your ex's behavior, focus on the lesson and not the behavior. The other parent may never change, so focusing on them being "wrong" is not only ineffective, but you lose the opportunity to help your children learn how to successfully navigate a difficult situation.

Listen to how they feel and what they are struggling with. Make sure you acknowledge and validate that where they are and what they are feeling is a rational response given their circumstances. Be solution oriented by asking them questions and helping them find solutions (don't tell, ask).

What did they learn? How might they handle things differently next time? What would they want to say to mom/dad next time? Is there a boundary that they need to set and how can they do that? Be patient; children love both their parents. They have their own pace for accepting the limitations of their parents and will find their own way to do so.

When you choose to focus on your children's growth rather than your ex-spouse's inept behavior, you turn lemons into lemonade. You are teaching your children valuable life lessons around navigating difficult personalities, accepting people as they are, and choosing your course given that reality. Parallel parenting allows you to liberate yourself from the unconstructive behaviors of your ex while minimizing the negative impact your ex has on you and your children. ■



*Karen McMahon's passion is to help men and women navigate the emotional difficulties of relationships, breakups, and divorce. After discovering that the pain of dissolving her marriage had been the stimulus for her personal transformation, she founded Journey Beyond Divorce in 2010. [www.jbdivorcesupport.com](http://www.jbdivorcesupport.com)*



# 5 Reasons to Buy Gifts for Your Co-Parent After Divorce

By Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao,  
Divorce Coach and Therapist

You certainly don't have to continue helping your kids by buying "their" gifts for your ex-spouse for birthdays, or celebrations like Mother's Day or Father's Day, but here are five reasons why you should consider it.

**I**f you and your ex-spouse haven't discussed or agreed upon how to deal with "special days" — such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, holidays, and birthdays — in your parenting plan, you should consider what obligations you have to help your children celebrate with their other parent. This could include buying gifts for your ex-spouse on behalf of the children you share.

You certainly don't have to continue helping your kids with these celebrations, but here are five reasons why you should consider it.

## 1 Buying Gifts for Your Ex-Spouse Helps Your Kids be Kids

If you help your child organize a gift/card/celebration in the same way you did before the divorce, it helps your child remain a kid. The goal of all divorced parents is to help their children grow up feeling like a “normal” kid. Providing this kind of help is an easy way to support that goal. You would never have expected your 5-year-old or 10-year-old (or even your teenaged) child to organize a celebration pre-divorce, so supporting them with these events takes a load of pressure off of them.

## 2 Buying Gifts for Your Ex-Spouse Keeps Your Kids out of the Middle

One of the biggest fears that children have after a divorce is that enjoying the company of one parent hurts the other parent. By helping your child do something nice for your co-parent, you’re showing them that it’s ok to love and have fun with both parents.

Put your child’s happiness first. Get excited about the celebration

they’re going to have with your co-parent. Ask questions ahead of time and look over any pictures they may have taken when they return. Too often, children of divorce are expected to compartmentalize their experiences to avoid hurting the other parent’s feelings – and this can be exhausting for them.

## 3 Buying Gifts for Your Ex-Spouse Shows That Post-Divorce Parenting Can Be Positive

One of the key predictors of a child’s well-being after a divorce is the amount of conflict between their parents. The lower the conflict, the better it is for the kids. However, parents can do more than just minimize conflict. When parents show their kids that they can have positive moments with each other (e.g., be excited together about a soccer goal, a good grade, a funny story), it makes their kids’ lives even better. Positive post-divorce co-parenting is not merely the absence of negative co-parenting; sharing and contributing to holidays and special days (like Father’s Day)

lets children feel like there is room for the positive.

## 4 Buying Gifts for Your Ex-Spouse Models Kindness

The best parenting advice that exists is to be the person you want your children to be. They are always watching you and when you model kindness and cooperative behavior, they will notice. Helping your child celebrate your co-parent is a great way to model behavior.

You and your co-parent will be at many of your kid’s events over the years — from sporting events and school functions to graduations and weddings. These events are much easier for your children (and their parents) when the relationship between the parents is an amiable one. There might be rough patches, but making goodwill gestures can help ease those difficult times.

## 5 Participating with a Generous Spirit Will Shape How Your Kids Experience Divorce

One key point is that if you’re going to keep buying gifts for your co-parent, you need to do it with a generous spirit. If you do it begrudgingly, your children will pick up on that. It also shifts over time; buying gifts isn’t an obligation you are entering into for the rest of your life.

It can be helpful to remember that your divorce will be part of your children’s narrative of their life and you can shape how they experience it. This is a small amount of time and money for a huge relationship payoff. ■

**One key point is that if you’re going to keep buying gifts for your co-parent, you need to do it with a generous spirit.**



*Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao has been in private practice since 2006, seeing children, adolescents, and adults individually and in family and couples therapy. She also provides divorce coach services for people searching for extra support and structure during their divorce process.*

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# Tired of Feeling Angry at Your Co-Parent? These 6 Tips Can Help.

When you're angry, you lose your ability to use reason and logic. Consider these six strategies to shift your thinking and move from emotionally reactive to calm and proactive when you're negotiating with your co-parent.

**F**or many people, being angry with your co-parent is a recurring and challenging problem. When you're angry, you lose your ability to use reason and logic. You're in an emotionally reactive state, which makes you super-dumb and do super-dumb things. You must not negotiate with your co-parent while you're angry because you're negotiating about the most important thing to you – your children – and you need to be as grounded and smart as possible during these negotiations.

By Alisa Jaffe Holleron,  
Co-Parenting Coach and Therapist



Consider these six strategies to shift your thinking and move from angry and super-dumb to calm and rational.

## 1 Learn To Sit with Anger.

Recognize anger for what it is: an intensely uncomfortable experience. There is a trigger, and “whoosh” the anger comes in. You never ask for it and you don’t want it, but it comes anyway. You may take anger very seriously, and think you have to do something about it. Just because it’s there, doesn’t mean that you have to do anything. Learning to just sit with the uncomfortable feeling will give you the time to think through whether action is needed and what the best action would be. Anger causes trouble; not because it is there, but because of what you do when it comes. Giving it space will either help you back off and not take action, or take action that is effective.

## 2 Anger Is an Emotionally Reactive State.

Emotionally reactive states like anger, frustration, resentment, and anxiety actually cause you to lose the part of your brain that exercises rationality and good judgment. Brain imaging shows that when people are in emotionally reactive states, the intelligent part of their brain essentially turns off. You do not want to take action when you are missing the most intelligent part of the brain. That is sure to get you into trouble! There are many ways to re-engage the part of your brain that shuts down when you get in emotionally reactive states. For instance, you could pause, breathe deeply, and practice mindfulness (see below).

## 3 Mindfulness Is a Simple but Powerful Skill for Working with Anger

Mindfulness is simply awareness. When anger comes, you can either be aware of it, or not. If you are not aware of it, anger will take control and you will be at its mercy. If you are mindful or aware, you can say, “hello anger I see you’re here.” The part of you that can see that anger is there is not the anger. It is another part of you that is separate and distinct from anger. So now, instead of just having anger taking over the show, you have anger, and another part of you that isn’t anger. This gives you the choice to either act out of anger, or act from a more calm, rational part of you. Research has shown that people who practice mindfulness are much better at regulating their emotions. It also shows that the children of parents who practice mindfulness feel better about themselves. There are many resources for learning how to practice mindfulness.

## 4 Remember That Your Co-Parent Is Distressed

Often people think that their co-parents are intentionally difficult, and enjoy driving them crazy. As much as you might want to believe this, it is rarely if ever true. People behave badly because they are distressed. People who are happy, calm, and at peace with themselves don’t behave badly. Your ex is behaving the way they behave because they have some form of distress that they don’t know how to deal with. If you feel like your ex is behaving the way they are because they are intentionally trying to hurt you, you are going to be much more triggered than if you realize that they are just a mess inside. Think of them as struggling and suffering (which they are) and you won’t be as reactive. By the way, understanding that they are distressed does not mean you have to give in to them or do anything different. Cultivating an awareness of their distress simply helps you respond less reactively.

## 5 Anger Often Comes from Feeling Powerless

Co-parents often feel like they are powerless and their co-parent holds all the power. But this is not true! It is very common that both co-parents feel powerless and like their co-parent holds all the power. This is a very hard thing for many people to wrap their brain around. If you remember that your co-parent feels just as powerless as you do, you are likely to feel less angry. Remind yourself that just as you feel threatened, your co-parent also feels threatened.

## 6 When You Feel Yourself Get Angry, Focus on Your Children

Don’t let your anger take you away from your children. When you stay in emotionally reactive states, you are disconnected from your children. The more you can stay connected to your children, the more it will benefit them. The more you stay connected, the more it will benefit you. The more you stay connected the more it will benefit your relationship with your children as well. Ironically, co-parents are often angry because they are worried about their children. Remember that working on being connected is what they need most of all! ■



*Alisa Jaffe Holleron, LCSW, has been teaching divorced co-parenting classes for 15 years. She is the author of An Unexpected Journey: The Road to Power and Wisdom in Divorce Co-Parenting (Live Oak Publishing, 2012).*

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# 5 Things You Must Do When Co-Parenting After Divorce

After divorce, civil co-parenting is essential. How well you co-parent will determine how well your child adjusts to the new family dynamic – as well as shuttling between mom’s house and dad’s house.

By Cathy Meyer, Writer and Editor

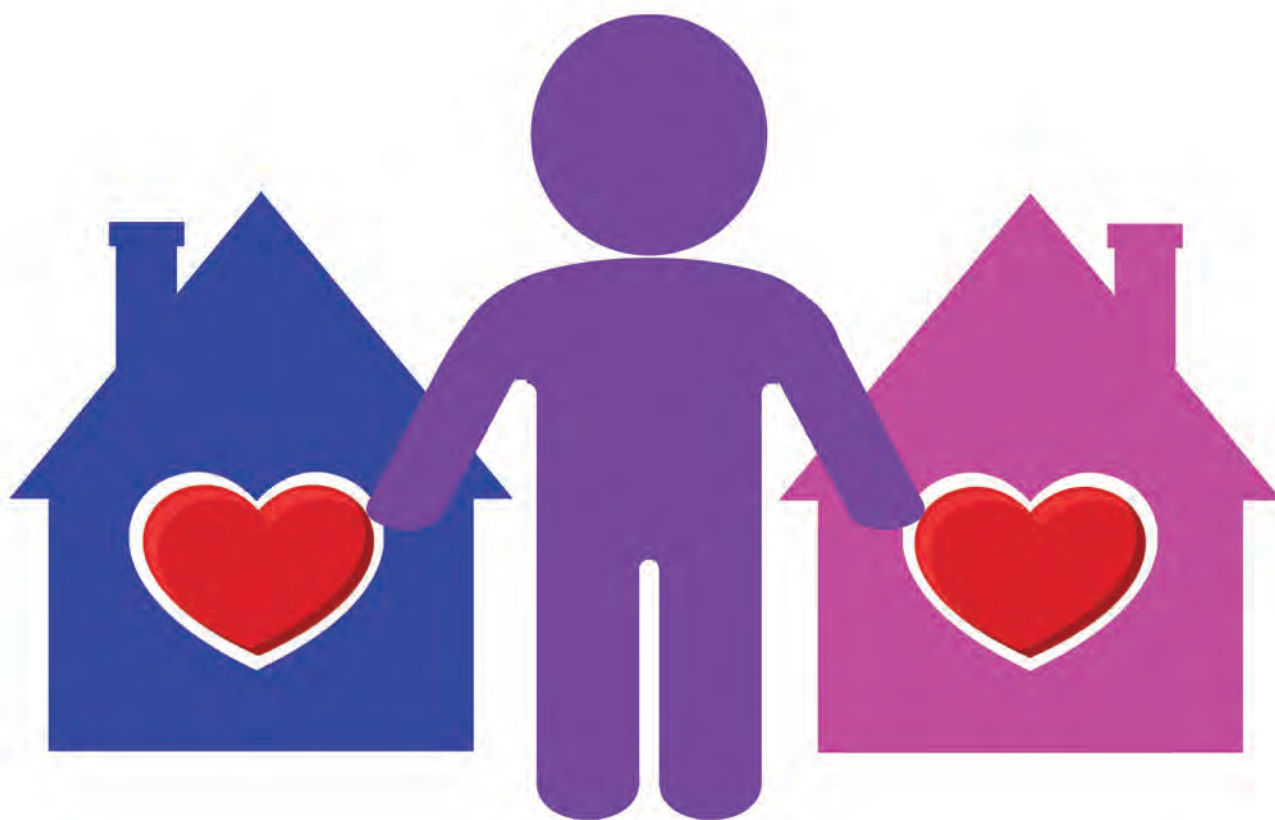
If you have children and are divorcing, your focus should be on effectively co-parenting both during and after divorce.

Here are five suggestions that will make co-parenting easier – and allow your children to suffer fewer negative consequences of your divorce.

## 1 Choose Shared Custody

Although not all situations are optimal for 50/50 shared custody, if you and your ex are both loving and involved parents, the best thing you can do for your children is give them equal time with each of you.

Aside from your regular day-to-day responsibilities – like making sure your children have nutritious food to eat, clean clothes to wear, and that they are in school before the bell rings every weekday morning – your main priority during and after your divorce should be to effectively co-parent your children.



Beginning the divorce process by being willing to share your children with each other, in spite of any negative feelings you may have for one another, is a good place to start. Divorce will end your marriage; it won't end your role as a parent and, let's face it, you will be forever connected to each other by your children. You might as well put your best foot forward when dealing with that lifelong situation.

## 2 Put Your Children's Needs First

Divorce does not end your responsibility to care for your child's financial, emotional, and physical needs. The emotional or financial stress you are experiencing does not excuse you from putting your children's needs above your own.

Don't fall prey to the belief that children are resilient and can wait for you to be supportive and attentive to their needs until you have finalized your divorce. Be fully present with your children – who now need you more than ever before – and do whatever you can to make sure their life runs smoothly both during and after your divorce. Keep their schedule as regular as possible, and don't uproot your children from school, friends, or family until your and your co-parent have agreed upon a parenting plan that works for everyone. If you've moved out of the family home, make sure to talk to your children daily and see them several times a week.

Of course you have needs, too – but those needs will never trump the need your child has to feel secure. If you want to start dating again, or spend the day at the spa, or go for a girls' night out, wait until the children are with your ex to indulge those needs.

## 3 Don't Put Your Children in the Middle

A concerned and loving parent does everything within their power to keep divorce from hurting their children. These parents do not expect or want their child to share their anger or resentment toward the other parent.

Your child will take his/her cues from you. If you treat your co-parent with respect and civility, it allows your child to feel safe loving both of you. If you disrespect the other parent or share inappropriate information about the divorce – like their other parent's affair or other “wrongdoings” – with your child, that puts them in a position where they feel that they have to choose sides. Listen to your child when they express their feelings and validate, not dismiss those feelings. Don't use your child as a messenger between his/her parents. Allow your child to be a child by remaining the mature, adult parent during and after your divorce.

## 4 Don't Try to Turn Your Child Against the Other Parent

Don't share private or misleading information about the divorce that paints your co-parent as the villain and you as the innocent victim with your child. You will create a painful loyalty conflict for them, and make them feel as though they have to hate their other parent if they love you.

Cutting a child off from their other parent causes that child great emotional pain and distress. You might not like your co-parent, or you might wish to punish them by turning their children against them, but – unless your ex is an addict, a criminal, or has a history of domestic violence – it is not your place to decide whether they have a right to parent their child.

Parental Alienation can occur when one parent persuades their child into disengaging from or actively hating the other parent. Speaking negatively about and/or willfully withholding a child from the other parent can cause Parental Alienation – as can blaming the other parent for their own financial problems, or withholding or providing the wrong information to the other parent about the child's appointments and special events (like the school play or their soccer game).

Some parents use their children as weapons against the other parent if they feel they have been wronged. What better way to hurt someone than to restrict their ability to spend time with and openly love and be loved by their own child?

The problem with parental alienation is it eventually backfires. If you engage in alienating your child from their loving, caring, other parent, then one day that child will realize that you used them as pawns in your game of revenge – and then you'll find yourself the focus of that child's anger and disgust. When you attempt to alienate your child from your co-parent, you are doing potentially irreparable damage to that child's ability to love and be loved as well as endangering your future relationship with your child.

## 5 Be Flexible

If 50/50 shared parenting is not going to work in your family's situation, be flexible when it comes to visitation with the non-custodial parent. Don't hold your child or the other parent to a rigid schedule that will exclude one parent from important events.

If your child is involved in sports or after-school activities, allow your co-parent to share the responsibility and pleasure of those activities with your child. If your ex calls and wants to take the child out for a burger or movie and it isn't “their night,” let your child decide whether to go or not. And if you have a special event to attend, ask your co-parent if they'd switch nights or weekends with you – and be sure to return the favor!

The key is to make your parenting plan child-focused, not parent-focused. In other words, if your child has a desire to spend extra time with your co-parent, decide based on the child's needs and desires – not your own.. ■



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# The Co-parenting Relationship

Your marriage may be over, but your relationship with the other parent will continue as long as both you and your children are alive. Healthy co-parenting is a way to carry your children through the crisis of divorce to a safe and happy future.

By Darlene Weyburne

Imagine waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of your smoke alarm blaring. Your first instinct would be to run to your children's room, scoop them up, and carry them to safety. You'd probably walk through smoke and fire, or any crisis, risking your own life to save your children. Divorce is a crisis for your children, and they need you to work together with the other parent to help them through it. Your marriage may not have survived the fire, but your relationship with the other parent will continue as long as your children are alive.

Whether you spend one day a month or every day with your children, you and your former partner continue to be co-parents. Co-parenting involves working cooperatively to assist your children in developing into socially and emotionally healthy adults. It involves communicating with one another concerning the needs of the children. Cooperative co-parenting means considering your children's need to love both parents instead of focusing on your feelings toward your ex-spouse. You do this because you understand that your children's need to see the other parent is more important than your need to punish him or her. Healthy co-parenting is a way to carry your children through the crisis of divorce to safety.

Picture your child on her wedding or graduation day as she looks out at the family and friends who have gathered to witness the event. Will she be focusing on how happy she feels or will she be worrying about whether her parents are going to fight? Throughout the rest of your life, you and your former partner will be parents and grandparents – and maybe even great-grandparents – together. You can struggle and fight your way through each developmental milestone in your children's lives or you can learn to celebrate them together.

## Developing Respect

Developing mutual respect for each other will help make you effective co-parents. Follow the golden rule of co-parenting: treat the other parent like you want to be treated. This can be difficult if he or she doesn't treat you with respect, but keep in mind that you're doing this for your children's survival and happiness – not for the other parent's benefit. Don't snicker or sneer at something your ex says or something your child relays to you, and don't attempt to convey to your children that you're the better parent. If you're worried that showing mutual respect will confuse your children into thinking that their parents will

get back together, avoid talking to your children about your feelings towards your ex: focus instead on his or her positive qualities as a parent.

To help you develop respect for the other parent, take a notebook and write down three instances in which he or she did well in the parental role. (For example: showing up on time for parenting time, praising your daughter for a good score on a test, attending your son's concert, or agreeing to pay for half of the cost of school pictures.)

## Supporting Your Children's Relationship with Your Ex

"It was hard for me to hear Crystal tell Mark what a good daddy he was," says Sue, the mother of a five-year-old girl. "I felt that if he was such a good dad he would have tried harder to make the marriage work. Despite how I felt, I didn't tell my daughter what a lousy father I thought he was for leaving us. I knew that she would adjust better to the divorce if I encouraged her to have a good relationship with him."

Support your children in loving and building a relationship with the other parent. Never start a sentence with "If your father/mother really loved you..." Don't allow your feelings of being betrayed to interfere with your support of your children's need to love and be loved by your former partner. Just as you're able to love a new baby without loving your other children less, your children can love more than one parent. If your child phones you while he or she is with the other parent, don't ask, "Do you miss me?" or, "Do you want to come home?" As painful as it may be for you, remember that your children are home when they're with your ex. They'll develop healthier relationships if they don't have to choose between loving you and loving their other parent.

Encourage other family members to support your children in having a relationship with the other parent. After a divorce, some extended families demand that the children remain loyal to one parent, and they say hostile things about the other parent in front of the children. This can only hurt your children.

Your children also need to continue to have a relationship with both sets of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Allow them to spend time with extended family and encourage them to phone and write letters. Make a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers of family and friends who love your children. Give your children a copy of this list and encourage them to call, write letters, or e-mail these people whenever they wish.

One grandmother, after her grandchildren moved out of state, made a mini-photo album of their time together each time her grandchildren came to visit. She kept one copy and mailed another copy to each of her grandchildren.

Don't criticize your ex's family, friends, or new spouse in front of your children. If you think your ex's family members are badmouthing you, speak directly to them about it. Demonstrate to your children, through your behaviour, that the negative things they say about you aren't true.

## Communicating About Important Issues

Major decisions should be made jointly. This includes major medical, dental, and psychological treatment; grade and special-education placement; or change of schools. Both parents should have access to physicians, therapists, educators, law-enforcement personnel, or other professionals who are involved with your children. Inform the other parent, in advance, of any scheduled meetings with these professionals.

Create a school folder that travels back and forth with each of your children between visits. The folder should include notes from teachers, homework, schoolwork, report cards, sport schedules, flyers about upcoming events, and information concerning school pictures, open houses, or parent-teacher conferences.

Communicate to your children's teachers and school counsellors that you have set up this system, and encourage them to place items directly in the folder. The cooperative effort between you, the other parent, and the school can enhance your children's academic achievement and emotional adjustment. Don't include any notes to the other parent from you. If your children are having problems at school, communicate this to the other parent by phone, through the mail, or in person.

Whenever possible, you should consider helping out in the classroom. Sharing your skills and knowledge with your children's class helps your children feel special, and it can facilitate communication between you and the school. For example, my children's father does chemistry experiments one day each year in each of our children's classrooms. Our children take great pride in these demonstrations.

If possible, both parents should go to school and sporting events. School open houses, concerts, plays, recitals, and sports allow children an opportunity to be the center of attention, which builds their self-esteem. Your children already feel different from children whose parents are still together; try not to make their lives more difficult by refusing to attend any event if your ex will be there.

"When my teacher said, 'Make sure your parents come to the open house,' it was easy for the other kids," says Bonita, aged 15. "They just had to remember to tell their parents about it. I had to decide which parent to invite and what excuse I was going to make up to explain why the other parent wasn't there." Knowing that both parents will attend school functions will help your children feel more normal. (If you live in a distant city, of course, your children won't expect you to turn up at every event. But make sure to attend the big ones: graduation, wedding, etc.) Don't use these events to discuss problems with the other parent. It's humiliating for your children to see you argue in public. If avoiding an argument with the other parent is too difficult or if it's too painful to sit together, sit in another area of the auditorium or classroom. Remember that these events are celebrations of your children's achievements. Your children deserve the privilege of having both parents involved.

Jenny, eight, was hit by a car while riding her bike. Her dad called her mom right away and told her what hospital they were going to. “I almost didn’t call Catherine (Jenny’s mom) because I knew she would blame me for the accident. The look on Jenny’s face when she saw her mom come into the emergency room, however, told me I had done the right thing by calling. Jenny was in a lot of pain and very scared. She needed both of us to hold her hands as the doctor put on the cast.” Every parent is aware that accidents happen and crises occur. In an emergency, your children need both parents more than ever. They need you to put your energy into helping them heal rather than blaming the other parent for the injury or illness. If your children get hurt and need medical attention, call the other parent immediately. Tell the other parent about major events that occur while your children are with you. This information can assist the other parent in helping your children through life’s tragedies.

## Child Support

Child support is another important issue that requires open communication between the parents. Pay your child support! You may not want to give money to your former partner, but your children could feel unwanted if you don’t pay your child support. Of course, you should never discuss child support with your children. If you don’t have enough money to buy them something, tell them you don’t have it. You don’t have to explain why. Use this opportunity to teach money management skills.

“Every time Dad was late sending the check, Mom would not let us go see him. It was so unfair. Why should we be punished because she was mad at him?” asks Pamela, aged 12. Don’t refuse to allow your children to see the other parent for non-payment of child support. Even though you may depend on this money, threatening to withhold parenting time hurts your children. It helps to remember that spending time with both parents is a basic need for your children rather than a privilege that the other parent must earn. Telling your children that they can’t see the other parent until the child support is paid is like refusing to feed your daughter until her brother cleans his room. Your children cannot control their parents’ actions. They have done nothing wrong and need to be with both parents.

If you’re unsuccessful in talking to the other parent about overdue child support, consult with a family therapist or an attorney. However, be extremely cautious about taking your ex to court. Legal battles are often drawn out and emotionally and financially costly for parents and their children.

“When my mom remarried, we moved onto David’s farm,” says Callia, aged 14. “My dad was really mad because it meant I was going to go to a different school. He thought my going to some ‘hick’ school was going to hurt my chances of getting into college. He took my mom to court and got the judge to stop her from switching schools until the court date in December. For the

first half of the year, my mom had to drive me to my old school. The judge finally decided that the school near David’s house was just as good as my old one so I had to switch schools in the middle of the year. What a pain! I think Dad was just jealous that Mom finally found someone she could be happy with.”

Legal battles between parents are usually emotionally damaging to the children. Clearly evaluate your reasons for initiating a court proceeding. Is it really your only option? People sometimes use these battles as a way of maintaining their severed relationship to avoid the pain and unhappiness that may come with the realization that the relationship is really over. Accept that the marriage has ended and move on. If you drag the other parent through court, you will drag and possibly scar your children, too.

## Mediation and Co-parenting

A mediator can guide the parents through the divorce process and help them reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. The mediator then usually writes up a summary of this agreement for the parents to review with their attorneys. Mediation is a good option for parents who are planning on co-parenting for the following reasons:

- It facilitates compromise and cooperation rather than competition between parents.
- It gives the parents – who know their children best – rather than the judge the power to make decisions about their children.
- It helps avoid court battles that often have negative emotional consequences for you and your children.
- It saves time and money.
- It assists parents in making decisions based on what is in the children’s best interest rather than on emotions.
- It helps clarify issues and reduce anger and bitterness.

The mediator can also help you work out a tentative parenting plan that will outline when your children will be with each parent. Try this plan out for a month or two before putting it in your settlement agreement. At the end of the trial period, discuss with the other parent any changes either of you feel are needed, and revise your plan. If your children have concerns about the parenting time schedule, let them know that you’ll listen and consider their thoughts and feelings. In your notebook, write down any questions you can think of that you’d like to ask a mediator.

A final tip: at the mediation session, put a photograph of your children on the table. This will help you focus on their needs rather than on your feelings about the other parent. ■

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*This article has been excerpted from What To Tell the Kids about Your Divorce (New Harbinger Publications 1999), by Darlene Weyburne, BCD, CSW, ACSW. Offering creative exercises and common-sense advice, this comprehensive guide will assist you to move beyond your own anger so you can help your kids cope with your divorce. [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com)*



# HOW CO-PARENTS CREATE LOYALTY CONFLICTS

Although there might be bumps along the road, most parents are able to put their children first and become successful co-parents post-divorce. Sometimes, however, one spouse can't let go of the bitterness and anger caused by the failed marriage; consciously or unconsciously, they may turn the children against the other parent. Here's how to recognize and protect your child from these kinds of loyalty conflicts.

By Dr. Amy Baker and Paul Fine

If you're co-parenting with an ex who engages in behaviors that induce loyalty conflicts, your child might become alienated and exhibit the eight behaviors described in this article. It's important for you to develop a sense of the ways in which your ex may be turning your child against you, and the signs that your child is being affected.

## Signs That Your Child is Caught Up in a Loyalty Conflict

Some children who are exposed to behaviors that may induce a loyalty conflict can maintain a relationship with both parents. Unfortunately, not all children are resistant to parental pressure. Some get caught up in the loyalty conflict and align themselves with one parent, but this doesn't happen overnight. If you keep an eye out for these signs and behaviors, you can intervene while your child is only mildly alienated, rather than refusing to interact with you.

### 1 A Campaign of Denigration:

An early sign that your child has been affected by a loyalty conflict is that he becomes unreasonably negative toward you. He behaves as if he's entitled to inform you of your shortcomings, and he does so in a harsh manner. Your child will make statements that criticize you, rather than the things you do, and may deny any past positive experiences with you.

A campaign of denigration also includes your child's willingness to broadcast his troubles with you. This unusual behavior runs counter to most children's desire to keep family problems private and can be damaging to your child's character formation. Rather than being taught how to work through problems and accept imperfections, she's being taught that people are expendable.

### 2 Weak, Frivolous, or Absurd Reasons for Rejecting You:

If your child is on a campaign of denigration, the rationale she gives for her anger may be out of proportion to the level of animosity she displays. Your ex may have encouraged your child to pounce on your errors, and it's as if your child was waiting for something to happen so that she could respond with full-scale rejection.

Some children will allege abuse as their reason for not wanting to spend time with the other parent. Obviously, an abuse claim is not in and of itself a weak, frivolous, or absurd reason for rejection. However, in some cases, a claim is proven to be false, but the child continues to cite abuse as a reason for the animosity. Regardless, child protection services may prohibit contact between the child and the alleged perpetrator while the abuse claim is investigated, allowing the other parent unfettered access to the child.

### 3 Hero Worship vs. Baseless Contempt:

Your child can simultaneously hold mixed feelings about her parents. However, if your child is involved in a loyalty conflict, she may have selectively lost this ability. All parents have potentially frustrating qualities, and even the most accommodating parents must set limits that cause resentment. If your child is involved in a loyalty conflict, however, she may demonstrate an idealized support for one parent. Such hero worship, combined with baseless contempt for the other parent, is unhealthy and unrealistic.

Lack of ambivalence represents a distortion of reality that could eventually interfere with your child's ability to function in the real world. A child who assumes that anyone less than perfect should be rejected will grow up to have few friends and difficulty maintaining relationships.

### 4 The "Independent Thinker" Phenomenon:

The hallmark of this phenomenon is not simply denial of the other parent's influence when asked, but anticipation that someone might assume such an influence, spurring strenuous efforts to protect the favored parent from blame. Your child's defense of your ex will be followed by rehearsed complaints that justify his rejection of you.

If your child is unduly influenced by your ex, his ability to think for himself is being compromised. All decisions are filtered through the needs and desires of his other parent. Your child is actually unnecessarily dependent on your ex, to the detriment of his ability to experience his own thoughts and feelings.

### 5 Absence of Guilt for Rejecting You:

Your child may behave coldly towards you, with no qualms about treating you in this manner. Gratitude may be noticeably absent. Your authority as a parent has been denied and erased, and your child has been encouraged to act as if your feelings



don't exist. However, such behavior is a sign of a loyalty conflict only when it occurs in response to or in conjunction with exposure to behaviors that may induce a loyalty conflict, and in the absence of a legitimate reason.

Absence of concern for other people is likely to interfere with your child's healthy development. A child who does not experience empathy will be unlikely to sustain meaningful, healthy relationships.

## 6 Reflexive Support for Your Ex in Parental Conflicts:

It's doubtful that a court-ordered parenting plan can cover every eventuality; there are always some gray areas. Toxic co-parents seem to possess a particular genius for focusing on those areas and making a case for why they should have the children during those times. No matter what the disagreement is about, children who are caught up in a loyalty conflict will side with their favored parent. The child "knows" that the favored parent is always right, and nothing the accused parent could show him would correct that misperception.

## 7 Borrowed Scenarios:

If your child is caught up in a loyalty conflict, she may start to make accusations about you that use phrases borrowed from your ex. Your child's words and tone of voice may appear strikingly reminiscent of your ex. Your child may make accusations that she can't support, use words that she can't define, or recall events (or versions of events) that never happened and that put you in a bad light.

## 8 Extension of Animosity to Your Friends and Family:

If your child is experiencing a loyalty conflict, she may begin to resist spending time with you as well as your friends and family. Formerly beloved grandparents, aunts, and uncles may suddenly be avoided. Your child may deny ever having been close or having fun with them, and may also denigrate them with cruel nicknames or comments.

## Common Mistakes when Co-parenting with an Antagonistic Ex

### 1 Giving in to Anger:

It's understandable that parents whose efforts to communicate with their children are blocked would become frustrated. Of course, the solution is not to take your anger out on your child. While your child may act rude, disrespectful, and hurtful, they are inwardly being torn apart. Responding with anger only reinforces the negative messages your child is hearing about you and increases the likelihood that your child will side with your ex.

### 2 Giving in to Depression and Defeat:

If you allow yourself to feel defeated and demoralized

when your ex attempts to paint you in a negative light, you risk feeling sad and depressed even when spending time with your child. Afterwards, you may experience feelings of despair and regret. Some co-parents allow negative perceptions expressed by their ex or their child to become self-fulfilling prophecies and unwittingly increase their child's disappointment.

### 3 Focusing on the Wrong Thing:

When faced with an accusatory child, some parents rush to prove that the child is incorrect. It's understandable to want to convince an emotional child that he has nothing to be upset about. But providing proof of your innocence is usually not sufficient, and refusal to accept the proof means that your child isn't really upset about the facts. Children in this situation typically respond to the way the parent behaves, not the facts being presented. The alternative to frantically explaining your innocence is to address the feeling and the reason behind the accusation.

### 4 Blaming the Ex/Failure to Look at Oneself:

Having learned about all the behaviors that may induce a loyalty conflict, you may incorrectly assume that every complaint is part of a master-plan to erase you from your child's life. This is counterproductive with respect to your relationship with your child: it means that you may ignore realistic and constructive criticism, and your child will perceive you to care more about being right than about being an open and truly dedicated parent. It may seem challenging to treat each criticism with an open mind – even when it comes from a child who has been unfair to you or from an ex – but you need to avoid closing yourself to self-improvement for the sake of your child.

## Protect Your Child from Loyalty Conflicts

Unfortunately, general co-parenting advice will be insufficient if your ex is undermining you and interfering in your relationship with your child. Your primary concern must be how to respond to your ex's manipulation of your child in a way that doesn't further entrench your child's alignment with your ex. It's important for you to protect your child from the effects of a loyalty conflict and allow him to love and be loved by both parents. ■



This article has been adapted from *Co-parenting with a Toxic Ex* (New Harbinger Publications, 2014), by Amy J. L. Baker and Paul R. Fine [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com)

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