

10 Essentials of Co-Parenting After a Divorce

If you have been through or are currently facing a divorce, by this point you know the difficulty that comes with the process. However, the unpleasant aspects don't just disappear once a divorce is finalized. For those with children, now the hard part of co-parenting begins.

1. **No matter what, it's all about the kid's best interest.** One of the things divorced partners frequently fail to recognize is the importance of the other parent in the kid's life. In the eyes of a child, that ex you no longer get along with is still one of their parents. Even if the other parent is incompetent or unreliable, it is better a child realizes this for themselves naturally than be sheltered from it. Otherwise, the child is more likely to imagine their other parent as a figure they can idolize or escape to when such fantasies can lead to severe harm. Of course, there are special circumstances in which this rule does not apply, such as abusive behavior where the child's safety is at risk. In dangerous situations, the child is still put first by protecting them from any threat.
2. **The rules should be the same in both households.** This is a problematic aspect as one of the most likely issues leading to divorce is differences in parenting. To keep things civil as possible, the recommendation for approaching continuity is not about specific discipline but rather general expectations. For instance, house rules could include: be respectful, be kind, or be patient. These expectations should apply to all members of a household, including parents and step-parents. Putting basic standards into practice gives the child a sense of consistency without allowing too much room for co-parents to bicker about a dozen different rules.
3. **Plan to eliminate confusion or miscommunication.** Most parenting plans include exact guidelines for the transition of kids and schedules for the days of the week, holidays, and vacations. Unfortunately, kids can forget these specific details quickly and usually don't look at an online calendar before asking their parents. To reduce frustration and unending questions, have an annual calendar with the days marked as to where the child is staying. This should be in both parents' homes. Now every party involved has constant access to all the information ahead of time.
4. **Communicate with the co-parent via the internet.** Even simple matters escalate unnecessarily when divorced parents communicate in person or on the phone. There are several online co-parenting websites such as www.ourfamilywizard.com which allows all communication to be recorded including changes in medical information, time-sharing, or school matters. This is a useful tool for everyone especially if issues need to be mediated in the future. Parents should resist the urge to verify things verbally to keep conflict to a minimum. Always confirm with your co-parent through an email or text message.
5. **Keep your kids out of the middle of anything relating to the divorce.** There are several ways that parents unintentionally encourage kids to be in the middle of a divorce. Kids already feel this way organically because they're caught between two warring parties, which sometimes results in them taking on adult-like responsibility and can damage them permanently from a developmental perspective. For this reason, parents should be careful not to use their kids to communicate with the other parent even for simple matters. Most especially they shouldn't tell the kids they can't talk about the other household. Kids are a product of both parents and, because of this, they can't divide themselves in two. Let your children be open about their experience and share it with you.
6. **Avoid encouraging false hope in your children.** Parents should not confuse kids by letting them believe that there's a possibility their parents will reunite. All kids already secretly want this because divorce leaves them feeling split in half, and in their reality, a reunion between their parents will solve everything. Giving kids false hope not only feeds this unrealistic fantasy but also only backfires on the parent making the claims. Now the child will learn to distrust this parent and others. If the parents do eventually end up reuniting, the kids shouldn't be told until things are entirely resolved between the two parents and the reunion is coming to fruition.

7. **Be honest with your child.** Depending on the age of the child and the nature of the divorce, eventually, all kids want to know why their parents separated. Parents shouldn't lie or avoid the conversation. Instead, answer only the question that the child asked in its purest form. "We divorced because we were not able to agree on important problems," is an example. Regardless of the fault or innocence of either parent, blame should never be assigned in front of the child. As a child ages, more information can carefully be given but only if they ask for it. This is also the perfect time to reinforce the notion that the divorce had nothing to do with anything the child did or did not do. "You are not responsible for the divorce," needs to be stated as many times as possible without irritating the child. This simple practice helps to relieve any unseen guilt and mend deteriorating relationships between the child and their parent.
8. **Be cautious of who is introduced to the child.** Eventually, one or both parents move forward with life and begin to date again. However, this process is for adults only and not children. Kids can latch onto an adult very quickly, especially when that adult is presented as safe and inviting. If the relationship deteriorates, a child will have a hard time disconnecting with the new person. In some cases, this can feel like a mini-divorce. When the adult relationship becomes serious, introduce the new partner as a friend first to ensure compatibility. Parents who continue to date someone whom the child dislikes will face defiant behavior in the future and can damage their connection with the child.
9. **Step-parents are assistant parents.** The word step-parent can carry a negative connotation thanks to Disney movies such as Cinderella and Snow White. The name is also not role-specific and leads to confusion over the boundaries of parenting. Try using the term assistant parent instead. This title immediately identifies precisely what the new parent's role is in the family unit – they are to assist the legal parent in whatever way is requested. In other words, the assistant parent does not make parenting decisions, the legal parent does, but the assistant parent does help enforce those decisions. This simple guideline eliminates many of the frustrations of a blended family.
10. **Act like an adult.** There will be many times in the child's life that both parents, assistant parents, new siblings, and extended family will have to be present at the same time. This includes sporting events, graduations, and weddings. Notice that this does not include birthdays, which are often best celebrated separately within each co-parent's individual unit. When a parent has to be in the presence of the other parent, it is best to see this as a business meeting of sorts. This way if you view your co-parent as untrustworthy, incompetent, or unreasonable, you can still politely interact with them. Pointing these attributes out to your co, however, is unproductive and can lead to unnecessary disagreements. Parents should make a decision ahead of time to act professionally in front of the other parent for the sake of their child and family.

Kids learn more from what a parent does rather than what is stated. All of the above are great ways to lead by example and create affirmative guidelines that are also essential for other relationships in the child's future. Parents who treat co-parenting as a valuable life lesson will reap the benefits of a healthy adult relationship later, and a happier, healthier child.