

# The Zacher Firm

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## Co-Parenting When Divorcing

Cooperative parenting with your ex can give your children continued stability and close relationships with both parents—but it certainly isn't easy. In reality, putting aside relationship issues to co-parent amicably can be extremely stressful and difficult.

Despite the many challenges, though, it is possible to initiate and maintain a cordial working relationship with your ex for the sake of your children. You have the power to remain calm, stay consistent, and avoid or effectively resolve conflict with your ex—all in the name of putting your children's needs first.

## Co-parenting after a separation or divorce

Joint custody arrangements, especially after an acrimonious split, can be exhausting and infuriating. It can be exceedingly difficult to get past the history of hurts and built-up resentment you may have with your ex. Making shared decisions, seeing one another at drop-offs, or just speaking to someone you'd rather just forget about can seem like impossible tasks. But while it's true that co-parenting isn't an uncomplicated or perfect solution, it's the best way to get your children's needs met and ensure their closeness to both of you.

It may be tough going, especially at first, but you can learn to effectively co-parent and still keep your sanity and self-respect. It can be helpful to begin thinking of your relationship with your ex as a completely new one—one that is entirely about the well being of your children, and not about either of you. Your marriage may be over, but your family is not; doing what is best for your kids is your most important priority. The first step to being a mature, responsible co-parent is to always put your children's needs ahead of your own.

Conflict between parents—separated or not—can be very damaging for kids. It's crucial to avoid putting your children in the middle of your fights, or making them feel like they have to choose between you.

### Rules of thumb

Remember that your goal is to avoid lasting stress and pain for your children. The following tips can save them a lot of heartache.

- **Take it somewhere else.** Never argue in front of your children, whether it's in person or over the phone. Ask your ex to talk another time, or drop the conversation altogether.
- **Use tact.** Refrain from talking with your children about details of their other parent's behavior. It's the oldest rule in the book: if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

- **Be nice.** Be polite in your interactions with your ex spouse. This not only sets a good example for your kids but can also cause your ex to be gracious in response.
- **Look on the bright side.** Choose to focus on the strengths of all family members. Encourage children to do the same.
- **Work on it.** Make it a priority to develop an amicable relationship with your ex spouse as soon as possible. Watching you be friendly can reassure children and teach problem-solving skills as well.

### The big picture

If you find yourself, time after time, locked in battle with your ex over the details of parenting, try to step back and remember the bigger purpose at hand.

- **Relationship with both parents.** What's best for your kids in the long run? Having a good relationship with *both* of their parents throughout their lives.
- **The long view.** If you can keep long-term goals—your children's physical and mental health, your independence—in mind, you may be able to avoid disagreements about daily details. Think ahead in order to stay calm.
- **Everyone's well-being.** The happiness of your children, yourself, and, yes, even your ex, should be the broad brushstrokes in the big picture of your new lives after divorce.

## Joint custody tips for divorced parents: Setting hurt and anger aside

The key to co-parenting is focusing on your child—and your child only. Yes, this is hard—really hard. It means that your own emotions—any anger, resentment, or hurt—must take a back seat to the needs of your children. Admittedly, setting aside such strong feelings may be the hardest part of learning to work cooperatively with your ex, but it's also perhaps the most vital. Co-parenting is not about your feelings, or those of your ex spouse, but rather about your child's happiness, stability, and future

### Children in the middle

You may never completely lose all of your resentment or bitterness about your break up, but what you can do is compartmentalize that and remind yourself that those are your issues, not your child's. Resolve to keep your issues with your ex away from your children.

- **Never use kids as messengers.** When you have your child tell the other parent something for you, it puts him or her in the center of your conflict. The goal is to keep your child out of your relationship issues, so call or email your ex yourself.
- **Keep your issues to yourself.** Never say negative things about your ex to your children, or make them feel like they have to choose. Your child has a right to a relationship with his or her other parent that is free of your influence.

### **Aim for consistency**

It's healthy for children to be exposed to different perspectives and to learn to be flexible, but they also need to know they're living under the same basic set of expectations at each home. Aiming for consistency between your home and your ex's avoids confusion for your children.

- **Rules.** Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but if you and your ex-spouse establish generally consistent guidelines, your kids won't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments. Important lifestyle rules like homework issues, curfews, and off-limit activities should be followed in both households.
- **Discipline.** Try to follow similar systems of consequences for broken rules, even if the infraction didn't happen under your roof. So, if your kids have lost TV privileges while at your ex's house, follow through with the restriction. The same can be done for rewarding good behavior.
- **Schedule.** Where you can, aim for some consistency in your children's schedules. Making meals, homework, and bedtimes similar can go a long way toward your child's adjustment to having two homes.

### **When your child leaves**

As kids prepare to leave your house for your ex's, try to stay positive and deliver them on time. You can use the following strategies to help make transitions easier:

- **Help children anticipate change.** Remind kids they'll be leaving for the other parent's house a day or two before the visit.
- **Pack in advance.** Depending on their age, help children pack their bags well before they leave so that they don't forget anything they'll miss. Encourage packing familiar reminders like a special stuffed toy or photograph.
- **Always drop off—never pick up the child on “switch day.”** It's a good idea to avoid “taking” your child from the other parent so that you don't risk interrupting or curtailing a special moment. Drop off your child at the other parent's house instead.

### **When your child returns**

The beginning of your children's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. You can try the following to help your child adjust:

- **Keep things low-key.** When children first enter your home, try to have some down time together—read a book or do some other quiet activity.
- **Double up.** To make packing simpler and make kids feel more comfortable when they are at the other parent's house, have kids keep certain basics—toothbrush, hairbrush, pajamas—at both houses.

- **Allow the child space.** Children often need a little time to adjust to the transition. If they seem to need some space, do something else nearby. In time, things will get back to normal.
- **Establish a special routine.** Play a game or serve the same special meal each time your child returns. Kids thrive on routine—if they know exactly what to expect when they return to you it can help the transition.

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