

TIPS TO MAKE CO-PARENTING WORK

Parents - it doesn't matter how you feel about the other parent...it only matters how you act. Parents must separate the feelings that they have about the other parent with the importance that they have in their children's lives. Children, for the most part, have had no say in your decision to separate and want to continue a positive relationship with both of you.

1. Do for the other parent what you would want if the situation was reversed.
2. Do not criticize or direct the other parent's parenting patterns. Although it would be helpful for both parents to follow the same parenting rules, you have even less control over what your former partner does now. It is important to overlook differences in parenting styles and only discuss important issues (but not in front of the children).
3. With the help of the mediator, negotiate a parenting plan before the physical separation if possible, so that both of you feel like you have some control over your future.
4. The mediator might suggest that both parents take a parenting course to learn about the developmental stages of children (and the impact of separation). Some parents do have trouble dealing with children at certain ages – e.g. a super jock may not know what to do with his three-year-old daughter. Likewise, many of us experience difficulty in dealing with teens. The parenting course will suggest ways and activities to make the access visits enjoyable for all involved parties.
5. If the children have regular activities, make sure that you both are included. For example, both parents may decide to attend the soccer games so that they can talk with the child about sports. Encourage the other parent to become involved, perhaps to volunteer as a coach. Make the soccer game "bonus" time - not time in lieu of other visits.
6. Unless you are in a high conflict situation or have been in an abusive relationship, have regular telephone discussions with the other parent to discuss the past week and upcoming week activities. That way you both know what is going on and can have input.
7. If possible, specify the minimum weekly access so that both parents and the children know when to expect the visit and can plan for it. Build up the visit so that the kids are excited about seeing their parent - they can feel that when they pick them up.
8. Be flexible and considerate about access. If the other party is working late, you could offer to drive your child to their home so that they can have a quick meal together. It is important to be fair about driving but it is more important that access happens rather than who "drove the last time".
9. Encourage the development of a hobby that may be of interest to the other parent. For example, if the parent likes stamp collecting, suggest that they start the child on a collection and add to it on special occasions. This is a built in activity for both of them. Similarly, if you are useless at math homework and the other parent is capable, let them work out the math with the children. Include the other parent as part of the family.

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10. Encourage your extended family to be polite and welcoming to the other parent. For example, they might invite them in for a drink when the children are dropped off at your mother's house.
11. MOST IMPORTANT, minimize conflict with your spouse. If tensions are high, arrange for a friend or grandparent to facilitate the exchange. Never badmouth the other parent or talk on the phone in an angry fashion while the children are present.
12. If the children are bored, make sure they take some things to the other parent's home and encourage them to keep some special things over there so that they have a second residence, not just a place to stay. If you have a regular activity (such as a weekly library trip) and the other parent would like to do that, allow them to make this part of their routine with the children.
13. Make sure that you both have all the current information from school, activities, church, etc. Make duplicates of some family photos so you both have them.
14. Help the children pick out cards and presents for their other parent.
15. Maintain contact with mutual friends and encourage them to support the other parent.

These ideas were contributed by Susan Hart, Mediator and Family Lawyer.