

## What is co-parenting?

Co-parenting is a phrase used to describe how parents who aren't living together can be sensitive to their child's needs. It means learning to make decisions together that both serve their children's best interests and avoid putting them in the middle. Most serious problems occur when children are stuck in the middle of parents who hate (or at least act like they hate) one another. Our recommendation is that kids need both parents. In addition, experts in child development agree that in most cases, children will thrive best when there is input from both parents. While some may question this, there is little doubt that most damage to children results from being stuck in the middle of warring parents.

Studies have shown that when there is high conflict between parents, kids who have more frequent contact with a non-custodial parent fare **WORSE** than kids who see the noncustodial parent less frequently. This happens because there are more opportunities for these parents to argue and fight with one another in the presence of their children. It is not easy to collaborate with someone you dislike or hate. At the same time, remember, this is about your children.

Begin with the realization that healthy children have positive relationships with both parents. Your job is to begin focusing on those areas where you can feel positive about the other parent and what he or she has to offer your children. All parents have something to offer. Nurturing the seeds of what is good in the other parent can often help more positive things grow. This means that whatever good that parent has to offer should have some pathway of getting through to the child. Step back and look at your co-parent in the role of a parent. Many people make lousy partners but have the potential to be terrific parents.

Don't assume that the parent he or she was in your relationship will be the same parent once you aren't together anymore. Remember also that in some ways, your child identifies with your ex-spouse. On some very basic level, children have a sense that they are 50% Mom and 50% Dad. Any trashing of your ex inadvertently trashes 50% of your child. Also, children have a shared history with both parents, and a shared present and future. Your co-parent is an important part of your child(ren)'s lives, and just as you would help your children succeed in school or sports, it is important to help them succeed in that relationship.

Encourage the other parent to stay involved in the children's school and extra-curricular activities. Respect your child's needs to have both parents there, without making them worry about the embarrassment of a public fight. If you cannot be civil with one another, work out an arrangement where your child does not have to witness ongoing conflict. If exchanging the children is problematic, you can find creative ways to minimize your contact with each other. You can arrange for someone else to send and pick up the children, or arrange the exchange at a neutral place. The key is to let your children go back and forth between homes with ease, rather than going through a minefield of conflict.

Another point to keep in mind is that both of you, as parents, are experiencing changes. For example, spending time alone with your children might be a new experience for you. Sharing custody is a further adjustment, especially if you are used to having access to your kids at all times. You may feel differently about how the other parent is handling a situation from your reactions while you were together. That is normal. Try to understand that the other parent is in a different role that may prevent them from handling a situation as you think they should. Allow for differences. Your children will adjust to your parenting differences, and they may even come to appreciate such differences.

### **Helpful Co-Parenting Behaviors**

1. Flexible with each other's new schedule
2. Respectful of family needs vs your own
3. Focus on kids' emotional well-being
4. Supportive of each other's goals
5. Respects boundaries
6. Positive communication dialogue
7. Respectful of new partners and stepparents

### **Harmful Co-Parenting Behaviors**

1. Confrontational for no reason
2. Condescending or narcissistic
3. Constant feeling of instability of boundaries
4. Emotional or physical threats to motivate desired behaviors
5. Family avoids having hard conversations out of fear
6. Inflexible with needs of the family
7. Doesn't pay child support/alimony on time
8. Inconsistency with schedules
9. Uses children to communicate through
10. Verbalizes resentments and anger towards Co-Parent around the children

### ***What do I do when my Co-Parent won't cooperate?***

In cases of high conflict families, parallel parenting is one method of shared parenting that allows parents to have minimal contact with each other while maintaining relationships with their children. Parallel parenting may be a long-term or temporary solution until differences can be set aside and each can work together more directly.

In parallel parenting each parent has certain responsibilities they carry out in the day-to-day duties without involving the other parent depending on your parenting plan. For example, parents can switch out attending their children's appointments and social events to minimize

the time they have to spend with each other. This allows both parents to stay involved in their children's lives.

When parents successfully parent within a parallel parenting arrangement, it's important each maintain their end of the parenting agreement. When trust is restored, parents are more likely to put aside their differences and a more collaborative and cooperative parenting relationship becomes established. Parallel parenting can provide a foundation for cooperative parenting as parents move from disengagement and towards a more direct style of communication and negotiation.

## **How do I deal with a parent who is sabotaging my co-parenting efforts?**

Dealing with a parent who will not cooperate or negotiate under any circumstances is extremely frustrating. It can also make it difficult for you to make good decisions. It is all too easy to sink to the uncooperative parent's level and make choices not in your children's best interests. For example, one parent communicating adult issues through a child can tempt the other parent to do the same. Resist the urge to do this, and keep doing the right thing. Making good choices for your children must be your focus. Parents often wait years for the payoff, but it will be worth it.

It is never too early to begin working on your negative feelings toward your ex-spouse. Having angry or painful feelings about your ex is not the problem. The problem comes when parents don't find appropriate ways of expressing and dealing with these away from their children. It is best to have a support system of family and friends, as well as a trusted mental-health professional with whom you can process these feelings appropriately. Don't expect to get through negative feelings overnight. Most parents report a back-and-forth process between negative feelings and a sense of resolve. Remember that this happens over time, and you have to find your own timetable. Parents who avoid dealing with these difficult feelings merely prolong the suffering for themselves and their children.

Parents who are unwilling to cooperate on any level usually have unresolved anger, grief, sadness, or all of the above. One parent's unresolved feelings can create an emotional atmosphere that prevents both parents from remaining child-focused. Do not stoop to that level. Historical arguments are better left behind; leave the issues of your relationship in the past and resist playing out those never-ending conversations that just leave everyone frustrated, angry, and tired. Everyone feels the lure of these arguments, but they are dead-ends to cooperative parenting. Simply refuse to engage in such conversations, and continually stress that you are interested in communicating about what is currently affecting your child's life. Doing this consistently may help, in that at least you (and your children) won't have to be exposed to these dead-end conversations.

If you are stuck dealing with a difficult parent, especially when there is a pending court case, it is a good idea to keep good records of all your interactions. Keep track of whether they

are keeping their commitments to any original agreements regarding custody, visitation, appointments, and providing consistent positive messages to the children. An exception to the preceding discussion is when children are in jeopardy from abuse or neglect. These are the only reasons to keep a child from seeing the other parent without supervision or appropriate safeguards. When there is an element of such danger, you must get the assistance of the courts, police, and anyone mandated to become involved in protecting the safety of children. In all other disagreements, attempts to foster positive relationships with both parents must be made in the children's best interests.

If you are faced with a parent who refuses to keep to an agreed schedule, or is putting your children at serious physical or emotional risk, then consulting with legal counsel and/or child protective agencies may be necessary. However, under no circumstances should you make a false report of abuse or neglect. Unlike abuse and neglect, bad parenting is not against the law. On-going co-parent conflict and domestic violence can be extremely harmful for children and families. Below are some tips on how to minimize its affects, especially when dealing with an uncooperative co-parent.

1. Set boundaries by adhering to the Parenting Plan and court orders whenever possible
2. Prioritize Self-Care by taking time to do activities that bring you joy
3. When necessary, take the high road when your co-parent's behavior is toxic and disengage
4. Join online or support groups for support
5. Speak in neutral terms when referring to your co-parent's actions or non-action
6. Only communicate when absolutely necessary
7. Use technology to communicate through so conversations can be monitored and tracked

## **Resource tools to help improve your co-parent relationship**

<https://www.ourfamilywizard.com>

<https://www.2houses.com/en/>

<https://talkingparents.com/home>

## **Community Resources for Help with the Co-Parent Relationship**

<https://www.illinoislegalaid.org/legal-information/parental-responsibilities-custody-and-visitation>

*Mental Health Therapists*

<https://www.therapistlocator.net/>

## **How do I begin seeing my ex in a new light?**

It is not easy to develop a new perspective about your ex solely as a parent. You will most likely have some leftover negative feelings about your co-parent. It can be particularly difficult when there was a lot of stress, tension, and difficult times during the relationship. Remind yourself that your common goal now is the well-being of your children. Issues that were alive and well in your relationship can be left in the past when you are dealing with present situations.

Many parents feel they are doing a good job if they are not saying bad things about the other parent in front of the kids. This is good, but it is not enough. Most kids pick up on parents' actual feelings through subtle, usually nonverbal cues. By getting support for yourself, you are less likely to create unhealthy messages even inadvertently. If you become overwhelmed with feelings of anger, resentment, jealousy, or revenge, make special efforts to address these with members of your support system or a good practitioner of mental health.

## **Six Keys to Successful Co-parenting**

1. How you feel about your ex is less important than how you act toward him/her. Putting aside your negative feelings is definitely in the best interests of your child.
2. Respect your need for privacy and the other parent's too. The only information that needs to be shared between co-parents is that pertaining to their children.
3. Both parents' time with the child is sacred. Don't make or change plans for the time your child is scheduled to spend with your ex. Honor the pre-arranged schedule.
4. Both parents have the right to develop their own parenting styles. As long as no abuse or neglect is happening, let your ex-spouse relate to your child as he or she sees fit.
6. Acknowledge what your co-parent has to offer your child. Remember the qualities that first attracted you. Those qualities still exist and are available to your child.
7. Expect to feel awkward and uncomfortable with this new way of relating. But keep affirming your commitment to the new relationship, and eventually your ex will begin to play by the same rules.

## **How do I balance my children's needs with my own needs?**

Parents should realize that focusing on their own needs helps their children. Most children, regardless of their age, will feel secure if they sense their parents are emotionally healthy. Making time for yourself, while often difficult, is important. Healthy outlets include counseling with a professional therapist, meeting with friends or support groups, or any activity that brings you pleasure. Neglecting yourself makes it difficult to be effective with your kids' needs. You must have outlets for dealing with your own difficult feelings.

Be mindful that your needs and those of your children will often be very different. While you might be feeling angry, anxious, or depressed about your new living situation, it is entirely possible that your child feels a great sense of relief now that things have changed. Avoid assuming that your children feel or think exactly the way you do. Their experience of your ex is very different from your experience. That is the way it should be. Remember, the relationship your children have with both parents is different from the relationship parents have with each other. You may feel betrayed or rejected by your ex, but that may not be what your child experienced. Parents and children rarely experience their parent's separation in exactly the same way. If you suspect you are confusing your own feelings with those of your kids, get some outside objective feedback from someone you trust. In the next section, we will explore one important way parents can create a stable home environment for their children: a well-thought out and flexible parenting plan.

## **What is a Parenting Plan?**

A parenting plan is a written proposal by a parent indicating how two parents will handle their future relationship with their child. It contains provisions on custody, visitation, decision making, and many other co-parenting responsibilities. A carefully constructed parenting plan is an important part of raising healthy children. A parenting plan must evolve with the changing needs of your children. Therefore, it does not have to include every potential situation you may encounter. However, it must be revisited regularly to make sure it meets your family's needs. As stated above, an effective parenting plan will outline how both parents will maintain a close and loving relationship with their children. Although the plan should contain many specifics, it should also permit some flexibility. You should be prepared to make occasional changes to schedule or routines if it will assist your co-parent. These times should be the exception and not the rule, however. Remember, when you show flexibility and understanding, you are loving your children; ideally, your co-parent is acting in kind. If they are not, keep doing the right thing.

Below is a summary list of what should be included in a parenting plan. This list is not exhaustive, and parents should use it as a guide to construct a plan that is right for them, their children, and their particular situation.

### **Things to consider when making a parenting plan:**

1. Schedules will cover time spent with both parents on weekdays, weekends, the school year, summers, birthdays, vacations, and holidays. This section should also outline how changes to the schedule will be handled.
2. Decision-making will include day-to-day decisions like eating meals and ensuring that homework is done as well as major decisions like health care and moving.
3. Information sharing will outline how parents will communicate about the variety of issues that involve their children.
4. Parent-child communication should be addressed and provisions made for how children will communicate with one parent while with the other parent.

6. Exchange of children for visitation will describe schedules and places for the effective transfer of children from one parent to the other.
7. Handling disputes will provide a brief plan for how parents should deal with the inevitable differences and conflicts that arise when raising children.

### **State of Illinois Parenting Plan Form:**

<https://ilcourtsaudio.blob.core.windows.net/antilles-resources/resources/a601856a-12e7-44fe-9076-88a8e150c3a7/DWC%20Parenting%20Plan.pdf>

### **These are some things the parenting plan must include:**

- Where the child lives
- Time the child spends with each parent
- How each parent gets information and records about the child
- How the child is to be transported for parenting time

Because of the amount of information that must be put in a parenting plan, it is a good idea to look at a sample plan when you create your own.

Each parent must file a parenting plan in a parental responsibilities case. If you have not filed an appearance with the court, you are not required to file a parenting plan, unless the court specifically orders you to file a plan. However, the court looks at your filed parenting plan when deciding who will get parental responsibilities. So it is helpful to file one, even if you aren't required.

### **Here are some important things to know about parenting plans:**

- Each parent must file a parenting plan within 120 days of asking the court for parental responsibilities,
- If the parents agree on parental responsibilities, including parenting time, they can file one parenting plan (signed by both parents) within the 120 days. If the parents don't agree, they must each file their own parenting plans,
- If neither parent files a parenting plan, the court will hold a hearing to determine the child's best interests, and
- The court will look at the parenting plans when it decides who gets parental responsibilities. Also note that stepparents have the same rights to visitation and parental responsibilities regardless of whether they were in a civil union or marriage.

### **The following questions may be used as a starting place when drafting a parenting plan:**



1. The geographical location of the parents: Where do parents live relative to one another? What are their addresses? Permanent or temporary?
2. Arrangements regarding the residential requirements of the minor child(ren): How much time will the minor child(ren) spend with each parent? Be as specific as possible, including days and times.
3. Arrangements for holidays and vacations: What are your plans for summer vacation and school breaks? List specific details including dates and times.
4. Arrangements for education: How will decisions be made for educational matters? For example, if preschool age, what school will the minor child(ren) attend? If private school, who pays what?
5. Additional transportation arrangements: Will any additional transportation arrangements be needed? If so, what will be the responsibilities of each parent?
6. Determinations regarding minor child(ren)'s health care: For example, how will medical decisions be made? Who will provide insurance? How are non-insured expenses paid? Who decides on seeking non-emergency treatment? Is there a dental plan? If not, who will pay what?
7. Arrangements regarding extraordinary expenses: For example, what financial arrangements are made for the minor child(ren) (such as each sharing extraordinary expenditures and the parent with whom the minor child(ren) resides bearing the ordinary ones during the minor child(ren)'s residency)? A fixed amount per month?
8. Any other factors: What other arrangements (such as religious classes, music lessons, sports/activity fees, camp or Scouts) are needed?