

Co-Parenting: How Separated Parents Can Make It Work

As a divorced parent, try to be flexible with your ex when it comes to the time you spend with your child. He may be asking for a schedule change today, but it's likely that you'll be the one running late or needing to switch days in the future.

By Brette Sember

Dave and Karen are parents who've just divorced. The ordeal wasn't pleasant, but did result in a typical child custody arrangement. The kids will live with Karen, and Dave will see them every other weekend and one night per week.

The divorce decree refers to Dave and Karen's "co-parenting" plan, joint legal custody and Karen's residential custody of the children. But neither parent is quite sure what those terms mean or how they're supposed to raise their kids together when what they really want is to start their own separate lives.

"Co-parenting" - or raising your children as a team even if you're not together as a couple - has become a buzzword in divorce proceedings. You've probably heard about the importance of co-parenting to the overall well-being of children of divorce. But what is co-parenting, and how do you make it work for you and your kids?

Types of Custody

Before you can begin to co-parent together, or even to understand what co-parenting is, you need to understand what the custody options are when your marriage or relationship ends. A variety of arrangements are possible; the biggest distinction is between legal custody and physical custody.

Legal custody refers to parental authority and decision-making power. Parents can have joint or sole legal custody. Those who share joint legal custody are supposed to make the important decisions about the children's education, health, religion and other issues together (and this is truly at the root of co-parenting). In theory, joint legal custody requires the parents to truly cooperate. But in reality, it's often established to make the parent who doesn't have primary physical custody feel better about the situation.

I've worked with several families where a visitation schedule was easy to create, but the father wouldn't agree to it because he did not technically have joint custody. Changing the wording to joint legal custody made the agreement more palatable.

While parents like to be able to say, "I have joint custody of my children," the designation is often in words only. Those who couldn't work together before are not magically transformed into cooperative parents by a court decree. The residential parent often ends up making many decisions about their child without the other's input.

On the other hand, if one parent is given sole legal custody, this doesn't necessarily mean that the other parent is shut out of participating in decisions about the children. A custody arrangement is what you make of it, meaning you can choose to work cooperatively as parents for the best interests of children.

Physical custody refers to how the children's time is shared by the parents. In most custody arrangements, the children have one home base, where they spend the most time. This parent is sometimes referred to as the residential or primary parent.



Read our complete Co-Parenting Series:

1. [How Separated Parents Can Make It Work](#)
2. [How to Be a Parenting Team When You're No Longer a Couple](#)
3. [7 Pitfalls of Co-Parenting and How to Overcome Them](#)
4. [Kids' Role in Co-Parenting: Why You Need Your Children's Cooperation and How to Get It](#)

If one parent has sole physical custody, it means the children spend all of their time with that parent and they don't see the other parent. This is rare, except in cases of abuse or neglect. Parents can also have joint or shared physical custody, which means they share children's time in a relatively equal way - such as alternating weeks or months, or splitting the week in half. As good as this sounds, it doesn't work for many families. Often, it's difficult for children to adjust to not really having one home base. Most commonly, one parent is given primary, or residential, custody and the other is given visitation

How Co-Parenting Fits In

Co-parenting refers to two parents continuing to function as a parental unit after a divorce. Instead of going their separate ways and never speaking or cooperating, co-parents continue to see themselves as a team who must work together and rely on each other to raise their children. It's the best thing possible for the kids, who need to know that they still have two parents who care enough about them to work together.

- Co-parenting is possible no matter what kind of custody and visitation schedule is in place. The only exception would be in relationships that have involved domestic violence or control issues.
- Co-parenting is not about equally sharing time or even making all of the big decisions together; it's a state of mind. Divorce does not end your parenting relationship. In fact, you'll be parents together for the rest of your lives, even after your children are adults. Co-parenting is a cooperative approach to the years ahead - a way of ensuring that both parents remain involved in the children's lives.
- Co-parenting does not mean second-guessing each other or having no individual freedom. Since you're each essentially parenting alone, you have to be able to make decisions on your own. Co-parenting involves facing the big picture of parenting together - working as partners to handle major issues, presenting a united front on matters such as curfews and household rules, and sometimes joining together to celebrate your children's accomplishments or milestones.
- Co-parenting agreements may be included as part of a divorce decree or family court order, or even negotiated and created with the help of a therapist. These agreements can be as simple as a schedule you'll follow together or as detailed as a specific plan of how you will make decisions and face parenting problems together.

How to Co-Parent Successfully

There are three basic steps for co-parenting success:

1. Talk to your children about the divorce together. Break the news together. Talking about why you are breaking up sets the tone for your entire co-parenting relationship. It lets your children know that you are still parents together and will continue to work as a unit. Only give general reasons for the split, such as, "Mom and Dad are fighting a lot and need a break" or "We've decided we don't want to be married anymore." Be sure to emphasize that the breakup is not your children's fault.

If you aren't comfortable talking to your kids together, seek help from a therapist who can assist you with this. It's that important.

2. Respect each other as parents. You're likely to have a lot of bad feelings toward your former partner, but you need to separate your parenting from those feelings. Your goal is to create a good life for your children, and you can best do that by parenting together in a respectful, cooperative manner.

3. Be flexible. Yes, you each have a schedule regarding seeing and caring for your children, but you need to be flexible with each other. Today, the other parent may ask for a change; tomorrow, it could be you who's running late, has an unexpected business trip or wants to take your children to a special event on a day you aren't scheduled for. Cut each other some slack. Try to approach your time-sharing on a monthly basis. Don't get upset if you have three hours less with your kids this week than you're supposed to. Things tend to even out over the course of a month.

Trends in Co-Parenting Agreements

Co-parenting agreements have become increasingly more specific over the years. For some families, they are pages and pages long. One family I worked with created a lengthy document that specified each parent's responsibilities to the finest details - bedtimes, types of meals appropriate for the child, even who was responsible for specific portions of the child's laundry. The problem with these very detailed agreements is that they don't leave a lot of room for flexibility. They also need to be re-drafted as a child ages and has different needs.

On the plus side, one of the biggest changes in co-parenting agreements in recent years is the wording. "Custody" and "visitation" are being replaced with more family-friendly terms, such as "parenting time," "parenting schedules," "parenting plans" or, simply, "agreements." These are words that everyone can relate to, and these terms don't degrade the parent who has the least amount of time with the kids.

Meanwhile, more divorced parents are recognizing that their time with the kids really belongs to the children, not to mom or dad. Parents are learning not to refer to "my time" or "my days" - another example of how co-parenting presents a more united front in child rearing.

Brette Sember is a former family law attorney and mediator. She is the author of numerous books on divorce and child custody, including [The Divorce Organizer & Planner](#), [No-Fight Divorce](#) and [How to Parent with Your Ex](#).
