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# DIVORCE

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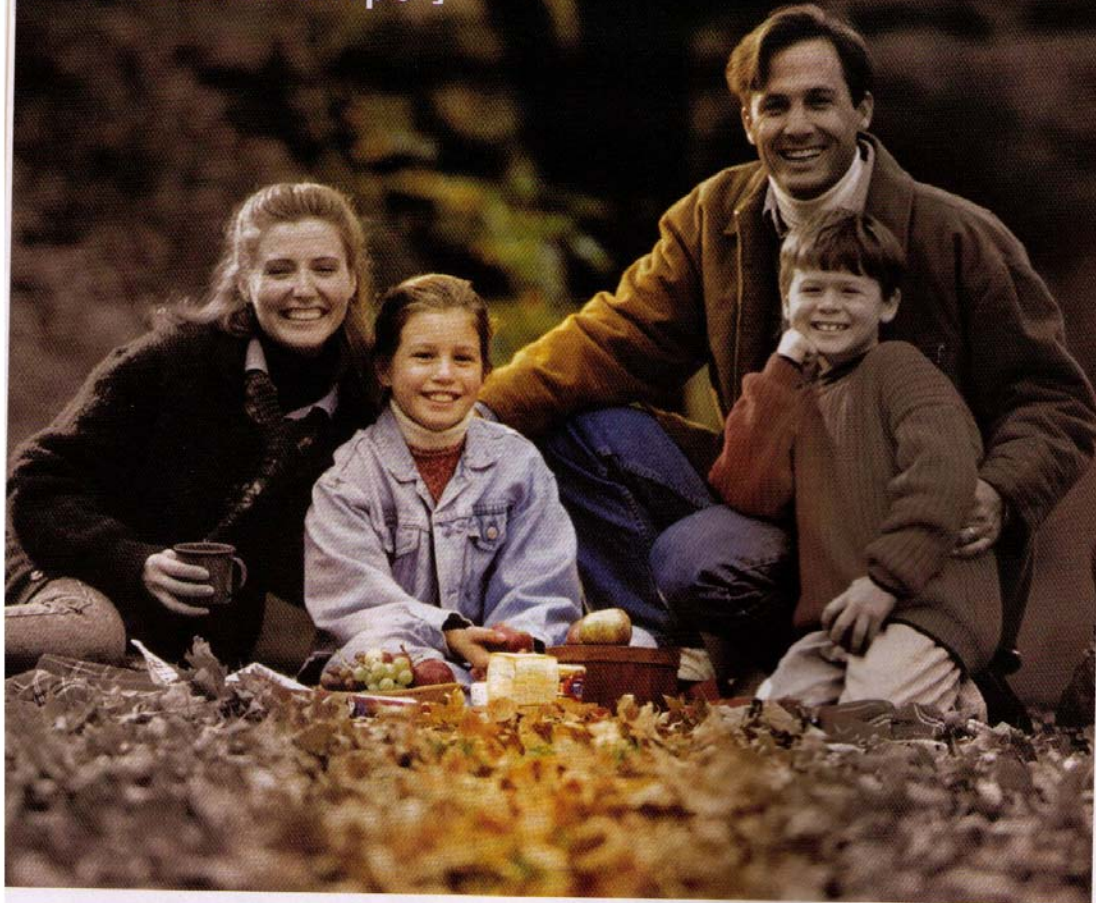
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## How Did I Get Here?

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# Both Sides Now

Putting children first means communicating calmly and effectively with the other parent. Here's how.

By Brette McWhorter Sember



**It is likely** that one of the reasons you and the other parent are no longer together is because you have difficulty communicating. You also probably both harbor some negative feelings towards each other. Despite all of this, you are going to have to develop a way to talk to each other so that your child can receive the benefits of having two parents. Even if you have a detailed, court-ordered parenting plan, problems and conflicts are going to arise that will require communication. Finding a way to communicate will certainly not be easy, but it will make your contact with each other easier and it will reduce stress for everyone involved.

You also cannot change how the other parent behaves. You can only focus on finding a way to cooperate with him or her to make life better for your child.

You both know you've got to parent together, but if you can actually verbalize this to each other it can go a long way towards making you really committed to it. Tell the other parent that your goal is to respect him or her and help your child continue to have a meaningful relationship with him or her. There may be all kinds of bad feelings between you and the other parent, but if you can just tell him or her that you will try to work together, you will have offered an olive branch that will help you parent together effectively. This

minutes late, he or she will call.

- You each will try your best to accommodate schedule changes requested by the other parent.
- You will work together to create rules for your child.
- Decide who will be responsible for washing the clothes taken to the nonresidential parent's home. You may be surprised to learn that this is often one of the most common problems that arises!
- Any items taken to the nonresidential parent's home will be returned with the child (especially crucial items — blankie, jacket, school books, instrument, sports uniforms, sneakers, favorite toy).
- Agree not to argue in front of your child.

**It is easy to fall back into your old patterns of arguing, disagreeing, and trying to hurt each other. Agree that you will not let this happen. Think about how important your child is to you.**

#### **TRY TO DEVELOP A NEW RELATIONSHIP**

You and the other parent are going to be parents together for the rest of your lives. Even though you are divorced or not together anymore, the parenting part of your relationship continues. It is a fact you cannot change and a bond you cannot break. Try to sit down and talk to each other simply as parents, not as two people whose marriage or relationship went bad. If you can both agree that you each want what is best for your child, then you can find a way to achieve it together. Resolve to be co-parents. Agree not to argue about past events and to talk only about the foreseeable future. It takes a lot of work and a lot of effort to develop a new parenting relationship with each other.

It is easy to fall back into your old patterns of arguing, disagreeing, and trying to hurt each other. Agree that you will not let this happen. Think about how important your child is to you. You cannot change who your child's other parent is, no matter how much you might want to.

might not be the easiest or most comfortable thing to do, and that is okay. Making the effort is what is important.

You are both human and will both slip up. Accept that you will both break the rules once in a while, but try to get past the mistakes and focus on keeping your child's welfare your priority. Remind yourself constantly that you are doing this for your child.

#### **SET CO-PARENTING RULES FOR YOURSELVES**

If you and the other parent are going to make sharing time with your child go smoothly, you need to set up some basic rules you will both follow. The following are some examples of rules that will help both of you cope (but you should create personalized rules that work for your situation).

- Schedule changes must be requested as soon as possible and preferably no later than 24 hours in advance.
- If the parent picking up or dropping off the child is going to be more than 15

Whenever an argument starts, develop a word or phrase you will both recognize that will indicate this is something you should discuss later, out of earshot of your child (such as "later," or "table it").

- Your child is not permitted to make changes in the schedule without permission from both of you.
- You will not use your child to transmit messages or money to each other.
- You will contact each other directly, either in person, by phone, by e-mail, or in writing.
- You will always check with each other if your child has a complaint about the other parent. Children's perceptions are often skewed and stories tend to grow as they are repeated to other people. Sometimes this is intentional and other times it is not. Always consult the other parent if the child is complaining about something serious before flying off the handle.
- The parent that the child is with at the time is responsible for transporting him or her to scheduled activities, such as



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sports and classes.

- Decide who will be responsible for your child's meal if transfer time is scheduled near a normal meal time.

Think about what other ground rules you will need to have in place to facilitate sharing parenting time and add any that are helpful to your specific situation.

You probably know the other parent's hot spots and he or she probably knows yours. Try to avoid setting each other off and make some rules that can help you both.

### BE FLEXIBLE

Flexibility is a must in making a parenting plan work. Think of a parenting plan as a give and take situation, not as giving in, letting the other parent win, or being victorious. If you let the other parent change weekends with you this time, then when you ask for a change, it shouldn't be a problem. This might mean you and the other parent will have to acknowledge and accept that you both have separate lives now, and that won't be easy.

This does not mean you should make changes on a regular basis. Your child needs stability. But some changes are okay. Do not feel that just because the judge told you to begin visitation at 5:30 p.m. on Wednesdays that it is written in stone. You and the other parent can make any adjustments to the schedule as long as you both agree to do so. If 6:00 p.m. works better for both of you, then make that your scheduled time. Be prepared to have to make adjustments as your life, the other parent's life, and your child's life change and grow. Parenting plans need to develop as situations do.

### DEVELOP A WRITTEN SCHEDULE TOGETHER

Even if you have a court-ordered schedule, you should still put it on a calendar so you both have a written schedule of where your child will be when. Plan out the schedule for the whole year, but do it in pencil. Then look at it and talk about what needs to be changed. If you have to go out of town when your child is supposed to be with you or if the other parent wants a weekend alone to prepare for an exam,

make adjustments. Look at how the holidays will be divided and talk about whether or not they will work the way they are currently scheduled and make adjustments as needed. Plan out any vacations either of you will be taking with the child at this time as well. Remember to be flexible, reasonable, and calm.

### BITE YOUR TONGUE

The most important thing to remember when dealing with the other parent is to think before you speak! Try not to have knee-jerk responses to the things about him or her that irritate you. Try not to get angry or upset in front of the other parent. Go home and punch your pillow or scream in the shower afterwards, but do not get into confrontations. This does not mean you have to be a victim or give in on every point. Choose your battles carefully and try to minimize them. Be polite and courteous to the other parent even if you do not get the same treatment in return. Keep in mind that you are putting up with it all for the benefit of your child.

### DIVIDE RESPONSIBILITIES

If the other parent was always the one to take your child for haircuts, maybe you want that to continue. Perhaps you were the parent who handled all doctor appointments. It is a good idea to talk about these kinds of responsibilities and develop a plan for who will handle them. If not, you may make an appointment for your child's dental check-up only to find the other parent made one as well. Decide who is going to be primarily in charge of:

- hair cuts;
- medical, dental, vision, and orthodontia check-ups (sick visits will be handled by whomever is with the child when he or she becomes ill or injured); and,
- purchasing seasonal or once-a-year items like new shoes, boots, coats, school and camp supplies, and sports equipment.

Many parents agree to let the residential parent handle these things, but involving the other parent will allow your child to feel as if both parents are involved in his or her life.

## Parenting Communication Rules

- Do not yell. The best way to communicate with the other parent is by using a neutral, calm voice. Raising your voice will lead to an argument.
- Be clear about what you are talking about. Try to address only one issue at a time. Do not confuse things by bringing up other topics or problems.
- Let the past go. Don't try to discuss what has happened in the past with your relationship. Focus on the present and the future with regard to your child.
- Repeat yourself if necessary. Sometimes you may try to discuss an issue relating to visitation and the other parent will try to bring up other things. If you respond, you will both be diverted from the important issue at hand—visitation. Repeat your question or comment calmly until he or she answers it.
- Choose your times. If you want to have a discussion with the other parent, do so at a time when you are both able to talk freely and are not rushed or tired.
- Try to talk in "I" phrases instead of "you" phrases. If you are having a problem with visitation, say things like, "I am having trouble picking Trevor up at 4 p.m. Could we change it to 5 p.m.?" Avoid saying things like, "You are going to have to change the time we exchange Trevor." Try to focus the sentence on your needs, your problem, your situation, and avoid sentences that sound like accusations, criticisms, or complaints.
- Do not discuss things you don't need to. This means letting some things go and focusing on the important issues. Choose your issues and let the smaller ones go.
- Speak with respect. Remember, this is your child's other parent and is extremely important to your child. This is the person you created life with. He or she deserves to be treated with respect, even if you believe that he or she is truly not worthy of it.
- You cannot change who your child's parent is, no matter how much you want to.



## ARGUMENTS

Never, ever argue in front of your child if you can help it. Your child is already struggling to believe that the divorce or breakup is not his or her fault. When parents argue about visitation, all the child thinks is, "They are arguing because of me." Handle all disagreements when your child is not around. It is not easy to put a cork in an argument, and you will not always be successful, but if you try it will help your child feel more comfortable.

## SETTING UP TIMES TO TALK

Some parents find that they are best able to communicate with each other if they schedule a weekly or monthly meeting or phone call to discuss their child. Do so when you can talk without your child overhearing. Talk about problems that have come up, schedule changes that need to be made, reactions your child is having, and things coming up in the future. Speak calmly and rationally as best you can, pushing aside all of those emotions that will get in the way of your objective.

If child support needs to be discussed, do so either at the end of the meeting or at an entirely different time.

The need for such formal meetings will dissipate the longer you are divorced, and you will eventually learn to have quick unscheduled phone calls or chats. There may be times when large problems develop in the future, and you might find that resuming a regular meeting or phone call schedule can help.

## GETTING HELP

If you are having trouble communicating with each other (after all, old habits are hard to break), consider seeing a mediator who can help you work through the issues and develop a new way to talk to each other without arguments. It really is possible to do so and you may be surprised at how well the mediation process works.

Your local bar association or the Association for Conflict Resolution (202) 464-9700, [www.acrnet.org](http://www.acrnet.org)) can help you find a mediator. A mediator acts as a neutral third party who helps you and the other parent work through problems

yourselves. If you and the other parent find you are completely unable to solve parenting problems, a mediator can help solve the problems at hand and teach you how to resolve problems that may arise in the future.

## WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS: TRY THE BUSINESS TRANSACTION APPROACH

If you have tried working together, if you have tried biting your tongue, and none of it has worked, if you and the other parent are at each other's throats and cannot agree on anything, think of your dealings with the other parent as a business transaction. Be polite, but do not argue or display emotion if you can help it. Communicate by written notes or e-mail if you cannot talk. You want to accomplish the task of parenting together and exchanging your child. Remember that this is not about you, your feelings, or the way you deserve to be treated. This is about making sure your child has two parents. Treat the situation as one you just need to deal with, as you would treat any other kind of activity in your daily life.

You might have a cranky cashier at the grocery store, and while his or her behavior is not appropriate or polite, you somehow find a way to deal with it so you can get your groceries. View parenting in the same light. You have a goal you want to accomplish (making sure your child has relationships with two parents) and the way to accomplish it is to keep your feelings to yourself and just get through the situation. Keep reminding yourself that you are doing this for your child.

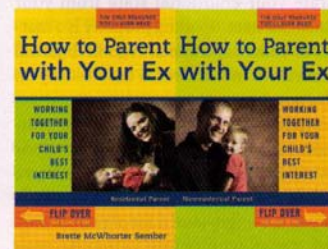
## WHEN IT IS UNBEARABLE

Sometimes, you and the other parent might get to the point where you absolutely despise each other and the thought of being polite to him or her may make you cringe. You don't have to be best buddies, you just have to find a way to communicate about your child without screaming at each other.

If you feel that you and the other parent simply cannot communicate at all at this point, you probably need a break from each other. Have your child ready for

scheduled visits, deal with the transfer and simply do not talk to the other parent beyond the essentials. If you can't even handle this, then ask a friend or relative to help you with the transfers. Let your best friend or sister open the door and make sure all of the child's belongings go with the child. If you need to avoid contact for a while, it's okay. It will probably ease the tension if you avoid each other for a while. It takes a while for emotions to simmer down after a divorce or separation. Most likely, things will eventually improve to the point where you can exchange your child without too much discomfort. But, this may take time and you need to be patient. You cannot decide you want to cancel all visitation plans because it is too uncomfortable for you. It's important for your child. Even if your child does not seem to have a very good relationship with the other parent right now, you have to give them the opportunity to know each other and be together.

Developing a good parenting partnership can take time. You cannot go directly from the heat of a nasty custody battle to cooperating fully with each other the next day. This is something you need to gradually build up to. Take baby steps if necessary.



This article was excerpted from the book *How To Parent with Your Ex* by Brette McWhorter Sember © 2005, residential parent section, and reprinted by permission of Sourcebooks, Inc., 1935 Brookdale Road, Suite 139, Naperville, IL 60563, U.S.A. Available at bookstores nationwide or through [www.sourcebooks.com](http://www.sourcebooks.com).

Essentially two-books-in-one, *How to Parent with Your Ex* looks at the roles of both the residential as well as the non-residential parent.