

7 Pitfalls of Co-Parenting

... and How to Overcome Them



By Brette Sember

Even after being separated or divorced for years, there are common problems that many co-parenting couples face. Whether these are big or small, the key is to find a reasonable way to work through the problems and continue to cooperate. Here's a rundown of the common pitfalls and what to do about them:

1 Using Children for Reconciliation – Because your children are at the center of your relationship with each other, some parents end up using their kids as an excuse for things. Sometimes, this means using a child as a vehicle to try to rekindle the relationship. If you find that your ex is doing this, have a conversation (away from the children) and lay it on the line. If you're not interested in reconciling, be blunt and make it clear (without causing overt

hurt feelings). Tell the other parent that you value his or her friendship and want to continue to parent together, but that you've moved on. Spending time together as a family is fine, but it cannot – and will not – be a courtship.

2 Relying on Children as Messengers – One of the most common mistakes that separated or divorced parents make is to expect their kids to carry messages to the other parent. Sometimes these can seem harmless: "Tell Mom I'll be half an hour late picking you up." But it's easy for mild messages to evolve into much more emotional jabs, such as, "You tell him if he doesn't send that check he'll never have visitation again."

The best policy is to make it a rule to never use your child as a go-between. Even asking a child to carry a sealed envelope to the other parent is dangerous. The child witnesses the receiving parent's reaction to whatever the message is. Often the child absorbs the anger or hurt expressed by the parent and misinterprets it as being directed at the child. Be responsible for your own communication with the other parent.

3 Keeping Track of Children's Belongings – Any parent who shuttles a child back and forth to the other parent knows how frustrating it is when the child leaves something important behind. Whether it's a beloved stuffed animal, homework or a cell phone, keeping track of your child's stuff can feel like a full-time job.

When transporting an infant or toddler, create a checklist of important items that must go back and forth. Designate a bag to keep it all in. Encourage the nonresidential parent to get duplicates for everyday items like clothes, bottles, paci-

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Editor's Note: Every year, 1 million U.S. kids become children of divorce. In settling custody issues, their parents are likely to create co-parenting agreements – committing to working together to raise their kids. But co-parenting has its challenges. In this third part of our series on co-parenting, we look at some common obstacles and how to overcome them.

fiers and so on. School-age children need help remembering what to bring along. Before leaving home or your ex's driveway, run through the list of important things to be sure that your child has them all. Teens should be encouraged to keep track of their own items.

Despite careful planning, things do get left behind. Although it might seem sensible to create a rule, such as "whoever's house the stuff was left at has to transport it," that may not work. The other parent might be at work and your child is at school desperate to get her homework before the bell rings. Try to work through these problems as cooperatively as possible. Encourage your child to get in the habit of double-checking to be sure that everything has been packed.

4 **Scheduling Snafus** – No parenting schedule is written in stone. On occasion, you and

your ex will end up making adjustments for each other's lives. While it's important to be flexible, sometimes one or both of you can lose track of what you've actually agreed to. Some parents institute a rule that they must make schedule changes in writing (or by email) and that requests must be made a week or three days in advance (except for emergencies). Print out a calendar with the changes you've agreed to, so you're both clear on what is happening when. Make sure you let your child know about any changes – he deserves to know in advance what his life will be like too.

Of course, there may be times when the two of you can't agree on a change. In this case, determine exactly why one parent is requesting the change and why the other will not agree to it. Refusing to agree just to be stubborn is a bit different than refusing to agree because that day is the mother-daughter luncheon at your church and you plan to attend with your child. In general, try to give preference to the parent with the most important event. A mother-daughter luncheon, for example, would take priority over wanting to take the child to the opening of a new movie.

If you simply can't reach an agreement about a change, go with your original schedule. That is your fallback, but compromise as often as possible. You could, for example, agree that Mom will take the daughter to the luncheon and Dad will get the rest of the afternoon to go to the movie.

5 **The Big L ... Laundry!** – Strangely enough, laundry is one of the biggest conflicts faced by parents who live apart. I once was a law guardian on a Family Court case involving two parents, Doug and Tammy, and laundry was one of their biggest complaints. Doug had residential custody and his new wife was very angry that

when the kids returned from stays at Tammy's house, none of the clothing they took with them was clean. Doug felt that this created extra work for his wife. But since Tammy was not the residential parent, she didn't think she should have any responsibility for the kids' laundry.

In many cases, it makes sense for parents to agree that they'll each be responsible for the laundry the child creates while at their respective homes. However, when one of you has a washer and dryer while the other has to head to the laundromat, this would not make sense. A simpler solution may be for the nonresidential parent to simply keep some clothing at his or her house and wash what has been worn each week.

6 **Late for a Very Important Date** – A major pet peeve of some parents

is that the other parent is always late – for pickups and for drop-offs. If this is a problem, discuss it with the other parent and explain how this not only inconveniences you, but it is also difficult for your child, who anxiously waits each time. Establish a rule that either parent will call if he or she is going to be more than 15 minutes late. Some parents get angry and want to force the late parent to forfeit his visitation if he is late, but all this does is punish the child, who loses out on time with that parent.

7 **When Visitation Involves a Babysitter** – It can be disconcerting to send your child off for a weekend with her father, only to find out that she spent much of that time with a sitter. While there are times when things come up unexpectedly, in general, the schedule should be designed to maximize time with each parent.

Agree to give each other the first right of refusal for baby-sitting. It may also make sense to arrange for the child to be cared for by a grandparent if neither parent is available. The point is that parenting time is meant to be used by parents and whatever you can do to maximize this will benefit your child. ♦

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