



## Co-Parenting through Separation and Divorce

# Making It Work

*Many children born today have the potential to be "Caught In The Middle" of parental divorce. Research suggests both difficult and promising news: Children from families of divorce may suffer painful consequences, and yet children who are surrounded by support and given the skills and information needed to cope with the situation suffer fewer painful consequences.*

How can this be done? Co-parenting is a phrase used to describe divorced or separated parents who are sensitive to their child's distress and who learn techniques that avoid putting children in the middle. Lets face it, many couples find it extremely difficult to divorce amicably. Typically there's potential for a great deal of anger, resentment, disappointment and pain. Parents may use children as weapons by controlling the other parent's access to the children or financial support. They may use children as "spies" or trash each other in front of them. All of this puts children at risk and may add to the burden which children of divorce already face. Some of the typical sources of conflict are:

- Money
- Holidays
- Medical issues
- Recreation (sports, hobbies)
- Religious/values education
- Discipline
- Education and/or career plans
- Parenting styles

When a family is reorganized because of separation or divorce, the parenting responsibilities also need to be reorganized. Remind yourself about **why** it's important to develop a new partnership as parents for your child/ren:

1. Children benefit from having a positive and supportive relationship with both parents.
2. Cooperative parenting reduces the levels of stress that echo throughout the entire family.
3. The absence of communication between parents or the presence of conflicting communication hurts the child if he or she is placed in the middle.



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*One of the most difficult issues for parents who share responsibilities for children is the issue of visitation. The following guidelines are meant to give you several ideas to work from. Each family must find what works best for them while avoiding too much pressure being put on the children.*

## General Guidelines

The guidelines that follow are examples of **constructive parenting goals** that promote the well-being of the children by helping them grow into healthy, happy, whole people.

- Both parents should encourage visitation to help their children grow and develop in a positive way.
- Children need to know that it is OK to love **both** parents.
- In general, parents should try to act respectfully toward each other, at least for the sake of the children.
- Each parent should show respect for the other's views concerning how to raise the children by trying, where possible, to be consistent. For example, if one parent is strongly opposed to having toy guns for small children, the other should take this view into account when buying toys.
- Each parent is entitled to know the whereabouts of the children during visitations, as well as whom the children are with (such as a babysitter or friend), if they are not with the other parent.
- The parents should discuss and try to agree on the religious education of the children, as well as on who is responsible for seeing that the children attend religious instruction.
- It is vitally important that each parent let the other know his/her current address and home and work phone numbers.
- Both parents should realize that visitation schedules may change as children grow older and have different needs.

## Visitation DO's

1. Be as flexible as possible about visitation schedules.
  - Give the other parent as much advance notice of changes in visitation as possible.
  - Remember to give the other parent your vacation schedules in advance and, where possible, provide your itinerary.
  - Remember that your children may have plans that could affect your visitation schedule.
  - Respect their need for flexibility.
2. Make visitations a normal part of life.
  - Find activities that give you and your children opportunities to build your relationship, but also allow some time just to "hang out" together.
  - Provide a balance of fun and responsibility for your children.
  - Encourage some visitations that include grandparents and extended family.
  - Make sure that your children have places that belong to them — even if it's just a section of a room in your home so it can be their home too.
  - Help your children get to know others in the neighborhood, so that they can have friends in both homes.
  - Keep to a routine and a schedule in preparing your children for visitations.
  - Have a checklist of items that children need to bring/take (clothing, toys, etc.). If the children are old enough, they can help pack or can pack independently.

- Sometimes, if it's appropriate, allow your children to bring friends along.
  - On occasion, separate your children, so that you can have individual time with each one.
3. Show respect for your former partner and concern for your children.
- Show up on time.
  - Inform them in advance if a new person/ partner (for example, new babysitter, new partner) will be part of the visit.
  - Share changes in address, telephone numbers, jobs, etc.

## Visitation DON'TS

Some parents use visitation to achieve destructive goals. **Destructive goals** are those that are based on one parent seeking to hurt the other parent, to disrupt his or her life, to inflict revenge for past or present hurts. To achieve that goal, the parent may use destructive strategies. This can create an even more hostile relationship with the former spouse and can seriously damage the relationship between the children and one or both parents. Destructive strategies can be deeply hurtful to the children caught in the middle and must be avoided. To avoid destructive strategies:

1. Don't refuse to communicate with your former partner.
- Don't use your children as messengers on divorce-related issues, such as child support. Those issues should be discussed by the adults only.
  - Don't make your children responsible for making, canceling, or changing visitation plans. Those are adult responsibilities.
  - Don't use your children to spy on your former spouse.
  - Don't use drop-off and pick-up times as opportunities to fight with the other parent. Deal with important issues in a separate meeting or telephone call, when your children cannot overhear.

2. Don't try to disrupt your children's relationship with the other parent.
- Don't try to make your children feel guilty about spending time with the other parent.
  - Don't use the visitations as rewards for good behavior by your children, and don't withhold visitations as punishment for poor behavior.
  - Don't tell your children that you'll feel lonely and sad if they visit the other parent.
  - Don't withhold visitations to punish your former spouse for past wrongs or to get even for missed child-support payments. Withholding visitations will punish your children, who are not guilty.
  - Don't withhold visitations because you feel your former spouse doesn't "deserve" to see the children. Except in the case where a parent is a genuine threat to the children, adults and children need and deserve to see each other.
  - Don't use false accusations of abuse to justify withholding visitations.
  - Try not to let activities (sports, hobbies, etc.) interfere with time your children need to spend with the other parent. Perhaps the other parent can sometimes transport the children to those activities and/or join with them.
  - Don't pressure your children about clothes, toys, and other items left at the other parent's home. The children need to feel they belong in both homes.
  - Don't falsely claim that your children are sick to justify withholding visitations.
  - Don't withhold phone calls to your children from the other parent.
  - Don't refer to the other parent's new romantic partner in a derogatory way.

3. Don't allow your anger against your partner to affect your relationship with your children.
  - Don't hurt your children by failing to show up for visitations or by being late.
  
4. Don't try to spoil your children or try to "buy" their loyalty or love.
  - Don't let your children blackmail you by refusing to visit unless you buy them something.
  - Don't try to bribe your children.
  - Don't feel you have to be a "buddy" to your children in order for visitations to be successful. Your children need you to be a parent.
  - Don't feel you have to fill every minute of a visit with activities. Allow some "down time" for routine activities together, such as cooking or doing laundry, or time just to be quiet together.

## References:

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