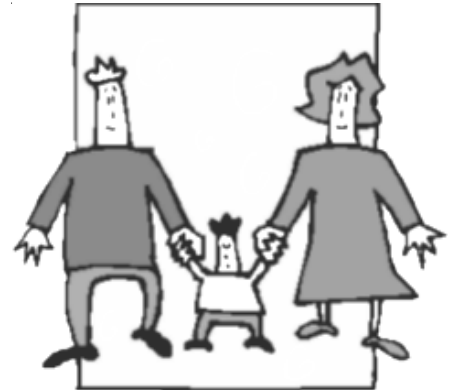

Co-Parenting after Divorce

How to co-parent

After divorce, the role of spouse ends, yet the role of parent continues. You may find it helpful to stop and think about the following questions:

- How can I be involved in my child's life?
- How do I manage parenting if my former spouse and I can't get along?
- How can I get along with my former spouse well enough to parent our children together?



Co-parenting means both parents play an active role in their children's day-to-day lives. The key to successful co-parenting arrangements is how well the parents function. What works best for some divorced parents may not work well for others.

Talk with other divorced parents for ideas. Then decide with your former spouse on the best parenting arrangement for you, your former spouse and your children. If your family has faced serious problems, such as family violence, child abuse, high conflict, or parental substance abuse, then co-parenting may not be the best option for your family. In such instances, you may want to seek information from the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault (1-866-644-3574 or http://www.nhcadv.org/crisis_centers.cfm).

Research has shown that some of the benefits of co-parenting include:

- Children develop feelings of stability.
- Children continue relationships with both parents.
- Children are less likely to feel torn between their parents.
- Children are less likely to feel abandoned.
- Children are less likely to feel they have to meet the social and emotional needs of their parents.

In every separation or divorce, parents need to recognize the importance of finishing what they started—raising their children. Separation and divorce are difficult for most children. They benefit when they have relationships with both parents and they tend to adjust better to divorce when:

- They have a good relationship with both of their parents.
- Both parents respond to the needs of their children.
- Parents don't argue, especially when their children are present.
- Parents don't place their children in the middle of their conflicts.

What a co-parenting arrangement includes

Parents must decide what aspects of parenting to share. This will often depend on where children live, how often they see each of their parents, and the parents' ability to discuss issues with one another without conflict or "rehashing" the past. Ask yourself:

What decisions will you need to make? Some of the "standard categories" are decisions about education, religion, extracurricular activities, medical and mental health treatment, sporting events, and social activities.

How you will make the decisions? Will you talk with one another? Write letters? Write emails? Meet once a year over coffee to discuss the major decisions and how your children are doing?

How and when you will talk to your ex-spouse? For example, will you only talk to one another when a decision has to be made? Maybe when you "exchange" the children? Will you set up a regular time once a month to check in with each other? Will you send emails to each other?

How will you arrange and share schedules? When will the children see each of their parents? How flexible do you want to be in scheduling? What if your ex-spouse is 30 minutes late? How will you decide to deal with this? Will the schedule vary with school or summer schedule? Will the schedule change as children get older, and will the children have a say in what they want?

Who will arrange childcare when neither parent is available? If one parent is unavailable, will the other parent have "first refusal?" Will the children go to the same babysitter? Or will they have a different babysitter near each parent's home? How might extended family help out, and would this be beneficial for the family overall?

How you will handle discipline? Will each parent handle discipline on his or her own? If a child misbehaves at mom's house, should he be disciplined by both mom and dad? If a child misbehaves at school, will she receive discipline at both homes, or just the home that she goes to after school?

What will happen in an emergency? In an emergency will parents notify each other before emergency medical treatment? Or after one parent has given consent for treatment? Have you exchanged all emergency contact information with your ex-spouse, such as work numbers, home numbers, cell phone numbers, etc? Sometimes these change when couples get divorced. School officials and all caregivers should have this information as well.

Parenting plan

The table below lists some of the things you may wish to consider when developing your parenting plan, which lays out parents role and responsibilities after their divorce. Who will be responsible for making certain decisions? Will you make the decision? Will your former spouse? Will you make the decision together?

Who makes the decisions about:	You	Other Parent	Together
<i>Household Rules & Caring for Children</i>			
Allowances			
Bedtimes			
Childcare/babysitting			

Who makes the decisions about:	You	Other Parent	Together
Children's grooming			
Clothing children will wear			
Computer: software, and video game use			
Discipline			
Handling behavior problems			
Internet use: how much, which sites, etc.			
Meals, overall diet, eating habits, snacks			
Television: which shows/how much time			
Toys and entertainment			
<i>Residential Considerations</i>			
Children's friends			
Schools children will attend			
Where children will live			
Transportation: Which parent, what times?			
<i>Peers & Social Engagements</i>			
Children's friends			
Dating			
Driving (for older children): car ownership, insurance, restrictions (where, how far, number of passengers, etc.)			
Overnight visits with friends			
<i>Education & Moral Training</i>			
Contacts with teachers			
Morals, values			
Religion			
Schools children will attend			
<i>Health considerations:</i>			
Dentist visits			
Doctor visits			
Medication			
Psychological counseling			
<i>Other Issues</i>			

The State of New Hampshire also provides guidelines for parents who are developing parenting plans (www.courts.state.nh.us/fdpp/forms/NHJB-2064-FS-Instructions,%2020050920.pdf). There is no one "right" or "wrong" parenting plan. The important parts are to work with your ex-spouse as much as possible, and to make sure children don't feel caught between their parents.

Problems between parent and child may result from problems between parents

Problems may develop if parents send messages to each other through their children. Problems also arise when a parent talks negatively about the other parent. Children may feel guilty and unsure of their parents' love when they're caught in the middle.

If a parent asks about a former spouse, children may report that things are fine, even if they're not. Or children may say things to make one of the parents feel bad. Again, don't use your children by putting them in the middle. If you want to know something about your ex-spouse, ask that person yourself.

Parents often disagree on how to discipline their children. When mothers and fathers have different rules, children may not respect either set of limits, or they may use the differences to gain power over parents. For example, a mother may change a curfew and the daughter may say to her father, "Mom lets me stay out until midnight." It's important to have clear rules and boundaries in your household. Try not to feel guilty if your rules are different than those of your ex-partner. If you are comfortable with the rules you have set, stick with them.



When it seems you and your former-spouse can't agree on certain issues, it helps to restate common goals. For example say things such as: *We both want to find a solution to this problem. We're both concerned. We share the same goal. Let's try to talk about this some more.*

After you have discussed discipline and the responsibilities outlined on the form above, it's important to set a date to look at adjusting the agreement. Changes in life may affect how you juggle responsibilities.

A good time to review the shared parenting form is when a child starts a new grade in school. Parents sometimes feel that returning to mediation or court constitutes some sort of failure on their part. It could mean simply that parents want to continue to work on their co-parenting relationship but need help. Feel free to seek whatever help you need to co-parent more effectively.

Helping children adjust

Children can adjust to a variety of living patterns, including living in two homes. How well children adjust depends on whether parents can minimize their conflicts, stop arguing and focus on their children's needs. When parents can't agree, tell the children there will be separate rules in each home. It may be frustrating, but it's important to remember that your children need you to be a strong, positive influence in their lives.

Make a check next to the things you will try to do to ensure a healthier adjustment for your child.

- Focus on my children's healthy development
- Accept my children's feelings about the divorce, even if they differ from mine
- Not pass messages to my ex-partner through my children
- Not make negative comments about my ex-partner in front of my children
- Try to arrange my life so my children will each continue to attend the same school and to play with the same friends, if possible

- Follow the parenting plan
- Jointly evaluate the parenting plan with my ex-partner at least once every year and make needed changes
- Avoid becoming a visitor in my child's life, because I understand that both parents should be responsible for raising children, not merely entertaining them
- Try not to compete for my children's love and attention, for example, by buying them more expensive toys or taking them on fancier vacations than my ex-spouse does
- Help my children remain connected to me, even if I am not with them every day by email, telephone, instant-messaging, and letters
- Make sure school personnel notify both households in the case of an emergency, or just for routine notices
- Try to provide consistency in rule-setting. If this isn't possible, I will help my children understand that rules must be obeyed in each household, just as different rules are obeyed at day care or school and at home

Try to make the transition from one home to the other as easy as possible for my children. If my children are upset, I will do my best not to show unhappiness or anger. I will talk to my children about their feelings if they want to talk. I will set up a ritual if this will help them make the transition. For example, we may stop for a snack on the way to the other household or go to the playground and talk awhile.

Married parents disagree; so do divorced parents

You may wonder what to do when a former spouse manipulates, is over-controlling or is having trouble negotiating with the other parent.

When you have strong disagreements, it may be time to re-think the post-divorce parenting arrangement and the ways you communicate with your former spouse. You might need a professional to help with this, or you might be able to find a good routine through trial and error.

If you and your ex-spouse are having a lot of disagreements, or if you see that your children are especially stressed, consider taking your child to talk to a mental health practitioner, such as a school counselor, a social worker, a therapist or a psychologist. It is sometimes helpful for children to be able to speak to a "neutral" third party to help them adjust to living in a divorced family.

Accept that you and your ex-spouse may differ on key parenting issues. Try to work on finding common ground, especially on the most important issues. Communicating about a few issues is better than not having communication at all. Try working on this right now: mark five of the following suggestions you will try.

- When a conflict occurs, I will remind my ex-partner that we have the same goal. For example, we both want the very best for our children, or we want our children to be happy and healthy.
- If talking directly with my former spouse does not work, I will try another method of communication, such as writing emails or letters.
- I will find a neutral adult to carry messages to my former partner.
- I will talk to a counselor, divorce mediator, or pastor to help me build a workable parenting arrangement.
- I will not discuss parenting issues when the children are around.

- I will follow the child-contact schedule, but I will also try to be flexible.
- When transferring my children from one household to the other, I will avoid discussing important issues.
- I will keep conversations businesslike by discussing only non-sensitive matters.
- I will keep personal information to myself.
- I will focus on what I can control rather than trying to change my ex-partner.
- I will avoid making unreasonable demands on my former partner, such as becoming angry if he or she is a few minutes late.
- If my former partner and I differ about rules or discipline, I will use reasons to explain my point of view. For example, "To improve the children's school performance, I want bedtime to be 8:00 p.m., rather than 9:00 p.m."
- When communicating with my ex-partner, I won't preach, use the "I'm better than you" tone of voice, or expect him or her to respond immediately.
- I will learn to better manage conflict, and will do my best to negotiate or compromise with my former partner.
- When my former partner picks up or drops off the children, I will watch my entrance and exit lines. I won't make negative statements such as, "You could have at least given him a bath," or, "Can't your ever be on time?"
- I will consult an attorney if I think the current parenting arrangement may be harmful to my children. For example, if I suspect my former partner is drinking, abusing drugs or neglecting or abusing the children, I will talk to my lawyer.
- I will teach my children how to get help if I think they may be in a dangerous situation at any time. For example, my former partner may neglect them if he/she is drinking, I will teach my children how to contact me or a neighbor, and how to make an emergency call for help.
- I will learn what community resources are available to help me better learn how to co-parent, such as a divorce education program, or a support group for divorced parents.

For more information about divorced families

Books

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study, by Judith Wallerstein; published in 2001 by Hyperion.

We're Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say About Their Parents' Divorce, by Constance Ahrons; published in 2004 by Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.

Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce, by Elizabeth Marquardt, published in 2005 by Crown.

Web sites

The Children's Rights Council: <http://www.gocrc.com/>

Parenting Plan/Co-parenting information:

<<http://www.mass.gov/courts/courtsandjudges/courts/probateandfamilycourt/afccsharedparenting.pdf>>

<www.courts.state.nh.us/fdpp/forms/NHJB-2064-FS-Instructions,%2020050920.pdf >

Fact sheet developed by Emily M. Douglas, UNH Extension Family Education & Policy Specialist, 5/06

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