

YOU ARE STILL PARENTS

A divorce or break-up doesn't end your duty to be a good parent. You may feel hurt, and you may have many things to worry about, but you need to help your children cope with the uncertainty of a divorce or the ending of their parents' relationship together.

Turning your children against their other parent is **not** the solution. If that happens, everyone will suffer, and it may backfire on you. Try to be helpful to your children and work to make your own life — and theirs — happy and successful.

How can you make this happen? Here are a few tips.

Dealing With Your Child's Other Parent

Divorce or a custody battle is not a pleasant experience and, for any of a number of reasons, you may harbor a resentment of your ex-partner. However, it is important to remember that he or she — like you — is a parent. How you treat your former partner, and how he or she treats you, will have a dramatic effect on the well-being of the children you share.

With that in mind, here are 10 suggestions for dealing with disagreements you and your former spouse may encounter:

1. Don't fight. It's simple. Make a decision not to fight — and stick to it.

2. Don't try to be (or expect anyone else to be) a “mind reader.” Speak up. In a non-argumentative manner, tell your former partner your thoughts and opinions. Ask for explanations if you need them. Often, e-mail is a useful tool.

3. Be a good listener. Really hear what the other person is saying and meaning. Ask questions that might clear up confusion.

4. Avoid “tit-for-tat” exchanges and yelling matches. You can't really win by being the loudest or batting the same old tired accusations back and forth.

5. Don't get personal. Stick to the issues and focus on the problem, not the people. Name-calling, sarcasm and insults only make matters worse.

6. Cool down before there's a meltdown. Anger leads to violence. Get control of your anger before you even try to address the problem.

7. Look at the problem from another point of view. Think about the other person's position. Try to imagine how he or she is feeling. You might

get some idea why the other person is not responding in the way you'd like. You may realize the other party has information you don't have and might have a better resolution.

8. Look for a new approach. Try to think and talk about the conflict in a different way. Find some common ground between you and your ex-partner.

9. Be reasonable. Don't make demands which can't possibly be met. Look for ways to compromise, so that each person "gives a little" in search of a solution.

10. Aim for solutions that make everyone feel like a winner. Instead of being determined to "win," be concerned with reaching a decision that is best *for your children*. If you find yourself taking a position for the principle of it, you should consider dropping the issue.

Shared Custody Tips

Sharing custody with the other parent is usually what is best for your children.

A court will decide an appropriate parenting plan if the parents cannot agree on one. This document will be your guide when you have disagreements with the other parent.

If the father has a new girlfriend, or the mother has a new boyfriend, it is better not to take the children to the friend's home. Remember, this is a time of adjustment not only for you but also for your children. Parenting time is meant to be a time for the parent and children to be together and enjoy each other. Visiting with the parent's friend may make the children feel that the parent does not have time for them.

If a parent can't come for the children on the day that was agreed upon, he or she should tell the other parent and the children as soon as possible. Not telling them may disappoint the children and hurt their feelings.

Some divorced parents think that custody with the other parent is not important. This is not true. Even if the parents can't get along, continued contact is important. The children need both parents if they are to grow up in a normal way.

Should you plan to take the children to an exciting place during your time? That is not as important as just being with the child.

As a parent, you shouldn't use contact with the child as a way to check on the other parent. Don't ask the children questions about the other parent. This can hurt them by forcing them to take sides.

The two parents should also agree on a common set of rules for their children. If they do not, it will be confusing to the children.

Finally, if the children have problems with the parenting schedule, both parents should find ways to address the problems.

Some Things to Remember

- Give your children and yourself some time to get over the pain of the family break-up. Help your children to remember the good times the family had in the past. Help them understand that the break-up is not their fault; that it does not mean one or both of the parents don't love them anymore, but that the family has simply been restructured.

- If you feel angry with your former partner, do not show those feelings to your children. Don't say bad things about the other parent. Your children need to love and respect both parents. Don't force your children to choose sides.

- Try not to disrupt your children's lives any more than necessary, especially right after the break-up. For example, if your children can stay in the same school and play with the same children for a while, they will do better.

- Tell your children about any changes which do become necessary. Stick to the custody schedule, but be flexible in allowing necessary modifications. Contact with the other parent is more important than most childhood activities and must take priority over baseball/soccer.

- Let your children know that they can talk about the family changes. They will be hurt if they feel that they cannot talk about it or think about it. Seek counseling for them if needed.

- Realize that, as your children grow older, you may need to talk about the situation again in a different way. With your guidance, you may be able to help them learn how to make a better marriage.

- Remember that, no matter how hurt you may be, your children are also suffering. Be supportive and help them adjust to changing circumstances. Together, you will all survive the experience and help each other through this difficult time.

For Legal Advice, See Your Lawyer

If you need help finding a lawyer, call The Missouri Bar Lawyer Referral Service at 573/636-3635.

In St. Louis, call
314/621-6681
In Springfield, call
417/831-2783