

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING

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As couples move from a marital relationship to one of co-parents, there is a significant shift to be made. At times, this shift can be challenging and also emotional. Below are some concrete guidelines to help you make this shift as successfully as possible.

Focus on communicating about the children only.

We often talk about shifting from an intimate relationship as partners to a business relationship with the business being raising your children. The children are your only focus together as you move forward. This means limiting your communications to such issues as logistics related to the children, health or education issues, or sharing observations about changes in behavior or other patterns of the children.

There are many ways to parent and most are ok.

All parents have their own style and methods of parenting. No two parents are alike. Even in families who live in one home, the parents often handle things differently. As co-parents it is important to respect and accept that each of you will handle things differently. Just as children adjust to teachers with different teaching styles, children also adjust to parents with different styles as long as you give the message that differences are ok.

Each of you will manage your parenting responsibilities in your own way. Each of you will make your own day-to-day decisions for the children. These decisions will be made without consulting or sharing information with each other. For example, each of you will decide what the children wear each day, what they eat, who they play with, how you spend your time at home, how much down time and how much structured time you have with the children, etc...

Focus on what is going well instead of what is not going well.

Raising a concern about the other as a parent is serious and should be reserved only for issues related to the safety of the children. For example, if you feel that your co-parent is leaving the children home alone in ways that put the children at risk or is letting the children wander in the middle of the street without supervision, you should raise that issue. On the other hand, if you feel that your co-parent is not playing with the children as much as you want that parent to or is making day-to-day decisions that you would make differently, that is not an issue to raise with your co-parent.

Respect each other's privacy.

As you make the shift from intimacy as a couple to co-parents, you will receive much less information about each other. Previous questions you may have asked are no longer appropriate. As co-parents you will no longer share detailed information about your own health, personal relationships, new partners, professional lives, etc... Information should be shared only as it is relevant to the children. For example, if you told the children that a close relative was very sick and this was impacting the children's emotional state, you should share that information with your co-parent so that he/she is aware and can support the children. On the other hand, you would not share detailed information with your co-parent about your own health and treatments if that did not directly impact the children. If the information to be shared, because it directly impacts the children, is about your co-parent's health, work or other circumstances, that co-parent determines what the children should be told and the method and times of the telling.

When you communicate with each other, remember this is a business relationship.

Show respect even if you feel the other parent doesn't deserve it. Be brief, neutral, focused on the children and explicit. Speak only for yourself. Avoid accusations or assumptions about the other. Use "I" statements only and do not convey what you think your co-parent thinks or what you think may be your co-parent's motivation for a particular behavior. Retreating from intimacy and establishing a business relationship requires respect and civility.

If you feel that your co-parent is not maintaining a business relationship, respectfully let your co-parent know.

Should you feel uncomfortable with a request for information, communication or other behaviors, advise your co-parent that you are observing the boundaries of a business relationship in terms of sharing information and answering questions. If the conversation continues beyond the scope of a business relationship, let your co-parent know that you are no longer engaging in the dialogue and are taking a break from the communication. Set a time to talk again. Taking a break can help both of you avoid destructive escalation of feelings. It can help you both get back into problem-solving mode and focusing on the business of raising the children.

Expect to feel strange about the new "business relationship".

The new behavior may feel strange, especially at first. Most people feel a mismatch between feelings and actions especially at the outset. Moving into a more formal business-like relationship is the foundation needed to develop a successful co-parenting relationship.