

Top 10 tips for co-parenting

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After a relationship breakdown involving separation or divorce, parenting children that live across separate households can seem daunting at first. Separated parents do not have to be friends but it is essential that they work together and communicate regarding the co-parenting of their children. This is no doubt the best outcome for both the parents and their children, and one that should always be encouraged unless there are safety concerns or a history of family violence.

There are generally two types of post-separation parenting: co-parenting and parallel parenting.

What is co-parenting?

Co-parenting is an arrangement where parents communicate effectively and reach decisions in their children's best interests together.

While this may seem hard or even impossible at first, remaining respectful, staying child-focused and setting boundaries will lead the way to effective cooperation. It is about working as a team across two homes to ensure that the children are as happy and healthy as possible.

What is parallel parenting?

For those parents that find it difficult to be in the same room together or where there is high conflict, parallel parenting may be a better option.

This involves keeping the “co-parenting” spirit and following the below co-parenting tips but disconnecting from each other and setting up clearer boundaries. Parallel parenting means no day-to-day updates but communicating effectively about major issues like school and health in a clear, respectful manner through a consistent method.

Tips for effective co-parenting and communication

1. Be respectful

As hard as it may be to put emotions and personal feelings aside, treating each other with respect (especially in front of the children) is a fundamental first step towards a successful co-parenting relationship.

For example, try not to criticise or blame the other parent and remember that small gestures can go a long way. Speaking positively about your co-parent to the children makes them feel safe and comfortable, rather than feeling “caught in the middle” of a dispute.

Do not post about your co-parent on social media (whether or not they are named) because you never know if it will get back to that person or, worse, seen by your children.

The easiest thing to remember is to assume a Judge or someone else is reading your communication – how do you want to be perceived?

2. Create a plan

Work out what the arrangements will be for the children and how you will communicate with each other to keep these arrangements working. If you’re having trouble agreeing about what arrangements are best for the children, attend mediation or get legal advice.

More information about working through parenting considerations and arrangements for children after separation can be found here.

Each family is different and what works for one family may not work for another family. For example, some parents prefer emails or text messages while others prefer communicating over the phone or in person. Do what works for your family. Some parents find emails harder to keep track of but if used, clear subject lines and limiting it to one a day are helpful for effective communication.

If communicating with your ex-partner in the above way seems like an impossible task, try to adopt the use of technology to help minimise face-to-face or phone contact.

There are a variety of post-separation communication apps on the market, such as:

- Our Family Wizard;
- MyMob;

- 2Houses;
- Divito;

which have different features suitable for each family (like calendar and document sharing).

Try not to include step-parents or significant others in the communication. Parents are the only ones that need to be involved in decision making for their children and involving others can lead to unnecessary angst and even disagreements.

Whatever care arrangements you have agreed to, it's best to stick to them as much as possible. Certainty and routine are easier for children and parents who have to re-structure their days living in separate households.

3. Be flexible

Being flexible does not mean you have to agree to or propose ongoing changes to existing arrangements. This can be disruptive.

Being flexible is about accepting that things don't always go as planned. For example, if one parent needs to travel for work unexpectedly then the other parent may need to take the children at the last minute.

Being flexible where possible also makes it easier to accommodate children's everchanging needs. Avoid making demands for certain outcomes and instead, offer several options to reach a decision together.

4. Put the children first – compromise

Whether communicating with or about your co-parent or organising appointments, events or activities for the children, put the children first and communicate accordingly.

Do not organise appointments or events during the time the children are with the other parent unless you have agreed on it first. Not everything is going to go as you proposed so be prepared to compromise.

5. Use a calendar

An online or copied shared calendar or sitting down once a year/quarter/month/fortnight to discuss upcoming events are helpful ways of keeping on top of a child's busy life. You could consider using one of the apps we referred to in point 2 above.

Putting in doctor's appointments, play dates or sporting events makes it easier for parents to be involved and on the same page.

6. Keep emails and texts clear and brief

After separation, people are finding their feet in separate households. Whatever you write or say needs to be specific, clear and brief so there is no room for misinterpretation, and it remains easy to follow.

Think about what you want to say before putting it down. Multiple or long texts can lead to confusion or arguments. Avoiding disputes about what was intended in a message makes the goal of focusing on your children easier to achieve.

7. Be timely and give reasonable deadlines and due dates

An email sent at 11:00 pm marked “urgent” may not get a quick response.

If something needs to be dealt with quickly, consider a text or call if it is an emergency. Otherwise, stick to the agreed method of communication and set out what decision needs to be reached and give enough notice for things to be thought over. Avoid sending school enrolment information the week they are due if you have had them for a few weeks.

8. Keep focused on the future

Communicating with your former partner about the children should only be about the children and their future. It is not an opportunity to raise personal feelings towards each other or talk about the past. Counselling is a better setting for this to occur in a healthy way.

9. Update the other parent

Having a “news report” style of communication about how the time with the children has been can be very beneficial. You can report on anything they have said or activities they have done which allows the other parent to feel involved and have things to talk about with the children when they are back in their care.

It can happen at changeover, like a quick update about exciting school events or “chatter” from the children or in the form of the agreed communication method. Sending photos of particular events is also reassuring.

10. Give and ask for information that you expect to get as a parent

This is pretty self-explanatory! If you want to know something or need to convey something, do so in a timely manner.

How a family lawyer can help

If you’ve tried all the above tips but have difficulties communicating with the other parent after separation and this is jeopardising the welfare of your children, you may need to consider other options.

We can assist you through mediation options to come to an amicable position on co-parenting or we can advise you on more formal avenues available.

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