



Tips for Working with an Uncooperative Co-Parent!:

10 Things You Should Do

Ron Cox

Assistant Professor

Often when a couple's relationship ends, the adults are so overwhelmed by their own hurt and anger that they are not very tuned into the how the divorce is affecting their child. For many children, their parents' divorce creates a deep wound in the emotional life of a child. Even unborn children and infants experience the stress of their parents divorce and can become irritable or sick as a result.

Most children eventually do get over the trauma of their parents' separation. However, most will also have a period in which they struggle to adapt to the new relationship. How the child is affected and how long it lasts depends largely upon how the co-parent get along in their parenting responsibilities. In order to reduce the impact of divorce on the child, it is important for both parents to be involved in their child's life. But, it is also very important HOW they are involved in their child's life. In other words, how the parents treat their children AND how they treat each other affects how their child will adjust. The following are some suggestions for separated parents who want to help their child adjust to their divorce:

Healthy co-parenting

So what does a healthy co-parenting relationship look like? Below are three primary characteristics of a healthy co-parenting relationship.

- A) The couple relationship must end. The fact that a physical separation has occurred does not mean that an emotional separation has been accomplished. Feelings of anger, hurt, resentment, and jealousy can maintain emotional ties that continue to bind parents in a couple relationship. The divorce couple must work to minimize these feelings and to work together like business associates.
- B) Like any business, there should be a strategy in place to help the business function smoothly. A parenting plan is a business plan for parents. It helps parents identify problem areas and work through them before they happen. Setting up this strategy is essential to success of the children. Many parents will need to enlist the help of a professional mediator, a marriage and family therapist, or a minister to help them stay on task and negotiate through the hard points. Research consistently shows that a key indicator of a child's well-being is the parents' commitment to cooperate on issues of the child's material, educational, emotional, physical, and spiritual interests. At the end of this article there is a sample parenting plan. It may work better for each parent to write down their ideas individually, then share the written plans with each other

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets are also available on our website at:
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

and talk about how to come to an agreement if there are differences.

- C) Establish clear boundaries of what is considered appropriate behavior in your new "business-like" relationship. Just like there are things that co-parents shouldn't do, there are certain things that co-parents SHOULD DO. A co-parent focused on benefiting their child will do their best to practice these behaviors even when the other parent is resistant or combative. A healthy co-parent:
 1. Tries to have similar rules for the children in both of the homes where children spend time.
 2. Gives his/her permission to love the other biological parent and encourages that bond to form.
 3. Doesn't try to sugarcoat the truth by covering up or explaining away the negative behavior of the other biological parent. They help their children succeed in their relationship with the other parent by coaching them to talk with the other parent about the negative behavior.
 4. Respects the other parent's household and their right to privacy.
 5. Attempts to establish a regular "business" meeting to discuss issues surrounding the children. This meeting may be in person, by phone, or even through e-mail.
 6. Does everything humanly possible to keep their appointments and to be on time.
 7. Offers the other parent extra time with the children before they look for a sitter.
 8. Wants their child to enjoy their time with the other parent and helps their child plan for their time at the other parent's place (for example, packing a swimsuit if they will be going swimming).
 9. Looks to make sure that children have everything they need in each home so only a minimal amount of baggage must be carted back and forth.
 10. Stays focused on the children and doesn't react to the threats, insults, or criticisms of the other parent.

Conclusion

Working with an uncooperative co-parent is difficult. It may take a lot of practice and trial and error to find a way to work together. However, the investment of time and energy

is worth it. Learning to work with a co-parent can literally be the difference between the success and failure for the children involved. If you need more help learning how to work with a difficult co-parent contact your local Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Office. They will be glad to offer you additional information.

Sources

Ahrons, C. & R. Rodgers (1987). *Divorced families: A multidisciplinary developmental view*. NY: Norton.

Ahrons, C. R., & Rodgers, R. H. (1987). *Divorced families: A multidisciplinary developmental view*. NY: Norton.

Bray, J., & Kelly, J. (1998). *Stepfamilies: Love, marriage, and parenting in the first decade*. NY: Broadway Books.

Deal, R. L. (2002). *The smart stepfamily*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House.

Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1985). Long-term effects of divorce and remarriage on the adjustment of children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24, 518-530.

Hetherington, E. M., Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*. NY: Norton.

Ihinger-Tallman, M., & Pasley, K. (1997). Stepfamilies in 1984 and today: A scholarly perspective. *Marriage & Family Review*, 26, 19-40.

Lutz, P. (1983). The stepfamily: An adolescent perspective. *Family Relations*, 32(3), 367-375.

Mills, D. M. (1984). A model for stepfamily development. *Family Relations*, 33(3), 365- 372.

Papernow, P. (1993). *Becoming a stepfamily: Patterns of development in remarried families*. NY: Gardner Press.

Speer, R. B. & Trees, A. R. (2007). The push and pull of stepfamily life: The contribution of stepchildren's autonomy and connection-seeking behaviors to role development in stepfamilies, *Communication Studies*, 58:4, 377 — 394.

Visher, E., & R. Visher (1982). *How to win as a stepfamily*. NY: Brunner/Mazel.

Visher, E., & R. Visher (1989). Parenting coalitions after remarriage: Dynamics and therapeutic guidelines. *Family Relations*, 38(1), 65-70.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices, or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. Revised 0913 GH.