



## Tips for Working with an Uncooperative EX!:

# 10 Things You Should NOT Do

Ron Cox

Assistant Professor

Often when a couple 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 do eventually 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 divorce affects children and how long these effects last depends largely upon how the ex-spouses 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 10 "Thou Should Not's" for separated parents who want to help their child adjust to their divorce:

1. Parents SHOULD NOT try to get back at their ex-partner by using the children (for example canceling visitation times). Using your children to punish your ex-partner for something he or she did that you didn't like is like hitting rocks with a baseball bat; you may send the rock flying, but you also damage the bat! When this happens sometimes bats can be damaged beyond repair.
2. Parents SHOULD NOT make appointments with their children and then break them. Parents who break appointments may increase the feelings of abandonment in a child. Deep feelings of abandonment have been linked to several mental health problems.
3. Parents SHOULD NOT scream and fight with each other in the presence of the children. This creates stress and anxiety in children, which can lead to many physical and mental health problems. Remember that your kids love both of their parents and don't want to hear bad things about either of them.
4. Parents SHOULD NOT try to get children to choose one parent over the other. Even if your ex-partner was a terrible person to you, they are still a parent to your child and your child will benefit from their continued involvement (the obvious exceptions to this statement are if the parent is involved in drug use or trafficking, sexual deviancies, or violence that may place the child in danger of abuse or neglect).
5. Parents SHOULD NOT talk to their children about their own troubles, pain and anger. Most children will want to listen and try to help; however, this will NOT help them. If a parent needs someone to talk to, they should get help from other adults and professionals, and let their kids be kids (This includes financial troubles resulting from delinquent child support payments).
6. Parents SHOULD NOT change the visitation schedule or time without working it out with the other parent first. To the extent they can respect each other and work as a team, this will reduce the anxiety and stress in a child.
7. Parents SHOULD NOT send their new boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse to pick the kids up or leave them in charge of the kids for long periods of time – this is especially important early in the new relationship.
8. Parents SHOULD NOT use their kids as messengers between parents (to send bills, notes, or anything else). It's very hard on children to be put in the middle of their parents' relationship.
9. Parents SHOULD NOT ask their children for detailed information about their visits with the other parent. Children will often feel disloyal to one parent if they enjoy spending time with the other. This will lessen their enjoyment of the visit and put them in the middle of your adult relationship. It's fine to ask how the visit went in a general sense, just don't try to get them to give all the details.
10. Parents SHOULD NOT continue to try to change their ex-partner. Parents need to stop focusing on what they don't like about each other and direct their energies toward benefiting their children. For example, if a partner was never on time for appointments before the divorce, using the children to force them to be on time now will only put the children in the middle and harm them.

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

### Conclusion

Working with an uncooperative ex-partner 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 an ex-partner 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 ex-partner 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.
- 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.
- 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, Robert E. Whitson, 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. 0309