

FOR OUR CHILDREN

LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER

CO-PARENTING GUIDE



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Office of the Attorney General of Texas

*“Children need and deserve the love, care,
and support of both their parents”*

When parents split up, it’s hard on everyone in the family, especially children. This guide is full of information about ways parents who live apart can work together to take care of their children.

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The Legal Agreement

This guide does not provide legal advice, nor is it designed to provide guidance for parents who want to change custody or visitation.

If you already have a court order for access and visitation and need help understanding it:

- Get a copy of the order from the court that issued it;
- Ask your attorney to explain it; or
- Call the Office of the Attorney General's Access and Visitation Hotline toll-free at 1-866-292-4636 (Monday – Friday, 1 to 5 P.M.) to speak to a lawyer who can help you understand your order.

If you do not have a legal order for access and visitation, you may want to contact an attorney for assistance.

What is Co-Parenting, and Why Do It?

“Co-parenting” (sometimes called “shared parenting”) is when both parents work together as a team to raise their children, even after the marriage or romantic relationship is over. This is not a skill that most people are taught, so you may have to do some learning along the way to find out the best way to co-parent in your family. This guide will give you some helpful tips to start learning to co-parent.

Many parents have found it helps to take co-parenting or shared parenting classes, both to learn new skills and to hear from other parents who are going through a similar situation.

The main reason to work at co-parenting is that it **helps children** deal with all the changes that happen when their parents are no longer together. Even though you may not want to talk to the other parent after the romantic relationship ends, you still have a very important relationship, and it’s the most important one of all: a parenting relationship.

All children need the love and support of both their mother and father. Parents who live apart can still provide these things if they work together and put anger and conflict aside.

Communicating With the Other Parent

When talking to the other parent after a breakup, you may feel the urge to scream, shout, or do other things to tell him or her about the pain and hurt you are feeling. Do everything you can to avoid doing this when your kids can hear you. If talking face-to-face is hard (especially right after the breakup), you might want to use e-mail or even written notes or letters to avoid bringing up old emotional fights.

Here are some good reasons to **NOT** argue with the other parent:

- Your kids are part mom and part dad, so hearing hurtful things about either parent, especially hearing them from a parent, can hurt your kids' self-esteem. Remember that your kids love both of their parents and don't want to hear bad things about either of them.
- Even though the marriage or romantic relationship is over, you can focus on the parenting relationship. What matters most now is – YOUR KIDS!!
- Arguing about the old relationship only makes it harder to work together as parents for your kids.

There are lots of **good** reasons to keep talking with the other parent after the split.

- Your kids **need** both dad and mom to participate actively in their lives.
- Your kids will do better and be happier when they have the love and support of both parents, even if it's from two different houses.
- Your kids need to see that you can talk with respect to the other parent. Remember – that's their mom or dad you're talking to and they love that parent!
- You can double check what your kids are telling you. Sometimes children in this situation will say things that may not be true about what goes on in the other parent's home - like, they get to use curse words at dad's house, or that mom thinks that school is a waste of time. Communicating often with the other parent will help you determine whether or not these things are true.
- You will both feel more involved in your kids' lives. Staying in communication means you know what your kids are up to, even when they're with the other parent.
- Regular communication can help you keep little misunderstandings from becoming big conflicts.

Talking to the other parent can be stressful, and you don't want to end up fighting and not getting anything accomplished. Here are some tips about how to make the most out of communicating with the other parent so you can get things done in a faster, less stressful way:

- Think of parenting as a job (maybe even one with a co-worker you don't like). If you talk with the other parent like it's business, you can get right to the point and not waste time and emotional energy on arguments and stress.
- Respect, or at least try to tolerate, the other parent's parenting decisions – remember, you both want what's best for your kids.
- Set up a regular time to talk with the other parent about your kids. This may not be fun or convenient, but it's important.
- Remember to make important decisions about your kids together.

Talking to Your Kids

Helping children understand why mom and dad don't live together is hard. If you are just making the decision to separate, it's important to try and talk with the whole family (both parents, the kids, anyone else considered immediate family) all together. When talking to your kids remember the following tips:

- Be honest about what has happened or is happening in the family. This **doesn't** mean you have to go into details about your relationship as a couple. Make sure to think about what your kids can understand at their age and explain it at their level.
- Stress how much you both still love your kids and that you will always be there for them.

- Make sure your kids know they did not cause the split. They will need to hear this over and over again.
- Counseling may help your kids (or yourself) deal with issues. Keep in mind that your kids might like to talk to someone other than their parents about these things.

What you say to your kids about the split-up of their family has a big impact on the memories they have of this time. You as the adult may be going through a very emotional time. Remember how much more emotional it can be for your child.

Here are some things that you should **NOT** tell your kids:

- Don't say bad things about the other parent to your kids or to others when your kids can hear.
- Don't tell your kids that you are not receiving child support if you are supposed to be. This will only increase their feelings of abandonment.
- Don't tell your kids about your troubles, pain and anger. Although your kids may be willing to listen and help you, it will not help them. Get help from other adults and professionals, and let your kids be kids.

When Your Kids Visit the Other Parent...

It may take some time for both you and your kids to get used to them going back and forth from one house to the other. It's normal for everyone to feel frustrated, unsure and anxious. It's easier on your kids when they see their mom and dad working together to keep things calm and steady. Remember, they are learning how to communicate by watching what you do.

Here are some things you can do to help the back and forth between homes go more smoothly for both your kids and you:

- Make sure your kids know the schedule and when they will be going from one house to the other.
- Re-assure them that it's good for them to spend time with both of their parents.
- Your kids need to know that it's okay to love and see both parents, and they need to hear that from both of you!
- Work together with the other parent to come up with a visitation schedule that will allow your kids to spend as much time as possible with each parent.

Here are some things you should **NOT** do:

- Don't change the visitation schedule or time without working it out with the other parent first.
- Don't panic, get angry, or feel insulted if your kids cry and ask for the other parent during your time with them. Just ask them if they would like to call the other parent. Sometimes, children (especially young children) just need to make sure the other parent is still there.
- Don't send your 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.
- Don't use your 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.**
- Don't press your kids for information about their visits with the other parent. 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, just

don't try to get them to give all the details.

- Don't make assumptions or jump to conclusions. If your kids seem moody after visiting the other parent, don't assume the visit was bad. If your kids tell you about problems or things that concern you regarding the other parent, speak with the other parent before jumping to conclusions.

Here's the big one . . . Don't fail to show up when you say you are coming to pick up your child. Children may remember forever the feeling of abandonment this creates.

Consistency

All children need consistency, and this becomes even more important for your kids after a family separation, when it seems everything is out of order. You and the other parent should:

- Set up "kid rules" and "parent rules" to be followed at both houses. The kid rules will include things such as curfew and chores, while the parent rules will include things like what clothes go back and forth and which parent washes the kids' clothes. Parent rules can also include things like respecting the other parent and no fighting in front of the kids.
- Support your kids' needs for a "home base" if they want one. Some children need a "home base," even if they spend equal time at both houses.
- Work your kids' schedules into the visitation schedule so they can continue to do all the activities they enjoy.
- Try your best to keep your kids in the same school and around their friends.
- Make every effort to stick to the agreed-upon visitation schedule.

Also remember that as your kids grow and situations change (moving into a

new house, for example), you will need to re-visit the rules and make decisions, together, about how they should change.

IMPORTANT: If you have been ordered to pay child support, paying it sends a strong message to your kids that you are committed to taking care of them. Not only does the law require it, but your kids need your financial support in addition to your emotional support!

How Children at Different Ages May Be Affected

Children experience their parents' split in different ways based on many different factors.

Normal feelings that children may have during the process include:

- Fear of abandonment
- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Loneliness

These feelings may be acted out by:

- Angry outbursts
- A drop in school performance
- Siding with one parent
- Pushing their parents to get back together

While these feelings and actions can be normal, if your kids display extreme

or unusual behavior for a long period of time, seek help from professionals. Every child is different and you know your kids best, so keep a close eye on them during and after the split to see whether or not they are adjusting to the changes.

One way to help prepare for some of the things that can come up with your kids is to develop a written parenting plan. Some courts will order parents to adopt a legal parenting plan. Even if the court doesn't require it, parents can adopt an informal written plan that is an agreement you and the other parent make about how to handle raising your kids.

By having some of these things thought out and written down, you can avoid some of the conflicts that are likely to come up at various stages in a child's life. For example:

Zero to One Year

Babies at this age are beginning to form attachments, so it is important to minimize changes and disruptions in their lives and show them love and affection. It's also important that they spend time with both parents so they can form attachments with both. Signs of distress are excessive crying, problems with feeding or sleeping, and withdrawal.

One to Three Years

Babies and toddlers at this age are becoming more mobile and gaining communication skills. They are also able to recognize close adults, so they are sensitive to separation. These kids need consistency in routine and patience from their parents to safely explore their environment. Signs of distress are nightmares, mood changes, and changes in toileting.

Three to Five Years

Kids at this age believe they are the center of the universe, and so they feel

responsible for the family split. Parents need to be positive during exchanges, keep a consistent schedule, and tell the kids that the divorce or split is not their fault. Signs of distress include toileting and sleep problems.

Five to Ten Years

Kids at this age are entering school and forming relationships outside the family. They may try to reunite parents and may feel and act out intense anger. Parents should develop a schedule that allows for consistency with school and extracurricular activities, and support their kids' interests and friendships. Signs of distress at this age include expressions of anger, drop in school performance, sleep problems, and physical complaints.

Ten to Twelve Years

Pre-teens tend to see things in black and white terms, and so may align themselves with one parent. Parents should encourage these kids to love both parents and support their kids' school and other activities. Signs of distress in pre-teens may include loss of interest in friends, becoming a perfectionist, depression, and isolation.

Early Adolescence (Thirteen to Fifteen Years)

Teens will often prefer to spend more time with friends than family, so allow room in the parenting plan for this. These teens need firm but fair guidelines and positive role models. They may also want to be included in creating the parenting plan. Signs of distress in this age group may include excessive anger or isolation, difficulty with school or peers, alcohol and drug use, and sexual acting out.

Late Adolescence (Sixteen to Eighteen Years)

Teens in this age group are learning to be independent to prepare for the separation from their parents, but they still need support and rules. These teens may also want to be included in creating the parenting plan. Watch for signs of distress, including reduction in school performance, difficulty with peers, alcohol and drug use, and sexual acting out. If parents aren't able to talk, your teen can say, "I'm spending tonight at mom's (dad's) house," and you won't know if they're really there.

Conflict with the Other Parent

Conflict with the other parent is bound to occur, but it doesn't have to hurt your kids if you take steps to prevent it. Try to keep all arguments away from your kids, and don't make negative comments about the other parent to your kids. If you treat communication between yourself and the other parent as a job, then conflict and arguments should be less likely to occur. The other parent may not approach parenting like you, but that doesn't make their approach wrong – just different. Tolerance of these differences will go a long way toward reducing some of the conflicts, and it will help your child to see that you and the other parent can still be respectful of each other.

If you have a serious concern about your children's safety when they are with the other parent, seek help to get your kids into a safe environment. The court can order visitation under supervision with the other parent if necessary. If you have evidence of child abuse or neglect, contact the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (toll-free) at 800-252-5400.

If the other parent is not letting you see your kids at the dates and times that you are supposed to see them, make sure you write down each time this happens in a journal or on a calendar. It may be a good idea to bring an unbiased witness (a neighbor rather than a significant other, for example) to the pick-up. This evidence (the journal/calendar and the witness) can be used in court to help you gain access to your kids.

Parenting Plan: Basic Elements

A parenting plan can be a formal legal document or an informal plan agreed to by both parents. It describes how the kids will spend time with each parent. If you already have a parenting plan, remember that you can change anything about the plan as long as both parents agree. If you don't have a parenting plan, you and the other parent should discuss these basic issues. The basic elements of a parenting plan:

- Determine when the kids will spend time with each parent on a normal basis.
- List important vacation and holiday times (including school breaks and birthdays) and decide how to split that time.
- Determine how you will make temporary and permanent changes to the parenting plan.
- Determine who will make day-to-day decisions, and how you will discuss and make important decisions together.
- Arrange for the financial and medical support of the kids (like how you will split costs of things like school supplies, hobbies and extracurricular activities).
- Determine how the exchange of the kids will take place.
- Decide what to do if you or the other parent moves to a new residence that is in another town or state.
- Decide how you will resolve a future conflict to avoid going to court (counseling, mediation, etc).

SAMPLE PARENTING PLAN

This is an informal parenting plan that parents who don't live together can use to help make decisions and reduce conflict. It is not designed to take the place of a legal order. This plan can be used to help deal with day-to-day issues, listing common issues that may come up so that parents can decide, and keep a record of, how much of a role each parent will play in the decision-making process for each issue.

The decisions you make using this parenting plan may be slightly different than your legal order – which is fine, as long as you both agree to the changes. If you cannot come to an agreement on issues, then you must follow the court-ordered plan. Some people find it helpful to work with a mediator or shared parenting coordinator to work out their parenting plans.

For each issue listed, decide which parent will handle the decision-making. This can be any arrangement that works for you, the other parent, and your kids. Here are just a few possibilities:

- Only one parent makes the decision for that issue
- Both parents make the decision together
- The parent who has the kids at the time makes the decision

The bottom line is to focus on what will work best for your kids.

Listed on the following pages are some issues that may come up for couples with kids of all ages. In the space provided, write out how you and the other parent will make decisions about these issues.

It may work better for each parent to do this individually, then share the written plan and talk about how to come to an agreement if there are differences.



SAMPLE PARENTING PLAN

Which house is identified as “home base”

Picking up and dropping off the kids

Extracurricular activities and payment for these activities

Religion and church attendance

Medical and mental health treatment for the kids

SAMPLE PARENTING PLAN

Representing the kids in legal action and making other legal decisions concerning the kids

Internet access and restrictions

Health care choices, including insurance plans, doctors and medical procedures

Education choices, such as choice of school, tutoring, summer camp or classes for the gifted

College savings



SAMPLE PARENTING PLAN

Pets

Privacy (such as a private phone line)

Other

Here are some issues that may come up with older kids and teenagers. In the space provided, write out how you and the other parent will make decisions about these issues.

Traveling out of the country, and who holds on to the children's passports

SAMPLE PARENTING PLAN

Getting jobs

Driving and car insurance

Cell phone purchase and use

Curfew

Tattoos and body piercing



SAMPLE PARENTING PLAN

Firearms

Smoking and drug testing

Consent to marry and consent to enlist in the U.S. armed forces

Other

Understand that these agreements may need to change over time to better meet the needs of your kids as they grow up or as your situation changes. You will need to stay in regular communication with the other parent to keep making the best decisions possible for your kids.

Unless the courts have ordered something different, both parents have the right to:

- Receive information concerning the health, education and welfare of the kids
- Talk with the other parent before making a decision concerning the health, education and welfare of the kids
- Access their children's medical, dental, psychological and educational records
- Consult with the kids' doctors
- Consult with the school concerning the kids' welfare and educational status
- Attend school activities
- Be listed as an emergency contact on the kids' records
- Consent to medical treatment during an emergency involving an immediate danger to the health and safety of the kids
- Be offered the chance to take care of the kids during the other parent's time if the other parent has something that keeps them from the kids

There are some extra things that parents going through a split should keep in mind.

- Alcohol consumption – limit the amount of alcohol you consume during your time with your kids, especially if alcohol has been a problem before. Never drive with your children if you've been drinking.
- New romantic partners – take care to introduce your new boyfriend or girlfriend to your kids slowly, so they don't feel as though their other parent is being replaced.
- Travel – when planning trips for business or pleasure, with or without your kids, keep your kids' schedules and your parenting plan in mind.

Additional Resources for Parents and Kids

The following list of websites and phone numbers are just some of the places that parents and kids can get help. Many of them will list other books and publications that parents and kids may find helpful.

In addition, there may be community- or faith-based organizations in your area that provide co-parenting classes or support groups.

www.txaccess.org

Texas Access and Visitation website (hotline: 1-866-292-4636)

A partial list of community resources is available from this website or the hotline.

www.txmediator.org

Texas Association of Mediators

www.texasafcc.org

Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (Texas Chapter)

www.collablawtexas.org

The Collaborative Law Institute of Texas

www.texasbar.com

Texas State Bar Association

To report child abuse or neglect:

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services - 800-252-5400

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GREG ABBOTT

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visit our website at: www.oag.state.tx.us

or call 1-800-252-8014



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