

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Cooperative Co-Parenting

It's unfortunate and difficult when a relationship doesn't work out. But just because the relationship ends for you, doesn't mean your role as a parent does.

It can be hard during a separation or divorce to put kids first, but healthy family dynamics and conflict resolution are among the most important factors for healthy child development. Painless co-parenting can be a reality. Keep in mind your common goal: your children's happiness, and try to:

Create a parenting plan. Set out your rules on paper and save everyone stress and trouble. Map out arrangements for who cares for the children, when and where, sharing expenses, etc., and be sure to respect these timelines and agreements. Many co-parenting websites offer parenting plan examples.

Put the kids first. Try to look at it from your children's perspective. Support and show enthusiasm for the great time your children share with your ex-partner, in-laws and step-siblings. For birthdays, sporting games and school events, ensure you both attend, even if it means sitting separately.

Communicate. A big complaint about co-parenting is that one parent always feels out-of-the-loop when the child is away with the other. Discipline, school events, concerns about development, and a flow of never-ending parental responsibilities need to be shared between parents. Depending on your comfort level with your ex, you can communicate via e-mail, telephone or face-to-face. Set some ground rules—such as never putting each other down. If one or both of you gets angry or emotional, agree to postpone the conversation until later.

Be consistent. Guilt and animosity can cause you and your ex-partner to overindulge your kids—and many children are wise to this. Consistency is critical now. Keep rules, discipline, chores and schedules fair and predictable at both homes so that you create a united parenting front. This will help kids feel secure and can prevent them from acting out or pitting parents against each other.

Choose battles carefully. As a couple you may not have agreed on things and it's not likely you will now. Trust the other parent to make good decisions. The dinner menu, whether your kids go out in short or long sleeves, and playtime activities shouldn't become battlegrounds. If you have a problem, speak to the other parent in a neutral place without the kids present, and discuss the issue in a non-accusing way.

Ask for help in decision-making. Whether it's time for college or for your five-year-old’s temper tantrums, it's wise and fair to consult the other parent on major issues.

Be positive. Try to think of your former partner not only as your "ex" but as your child's mother or father. He or she will always be part of your life. And while any negative emotions you feel will subside, damage caused by a dysfunctional relationship and combative separation or divorce can be life-long for your child.

Focus on the qualities you respect in your former partner and make an effort to remember the times when you did get along. If you have to minimize face-to-face contact to keep the peace, so be it. Providing your children with an environment where they feel safe, comfortable and loved is what's most important.

Separation or divorce can be the most difficult time of your life. But your children's well-being is the most important thing. Never forget that this is a stressful and confusing time for them too. The more

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amicable and communicative both parents are, the more relaxed and less afraid your kids will be. By putting your children first, you and your ex-partner are sure to set the stage for successful co-parenting and a happier, healthier family dynamic.