

Co-parenting After Divorce

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This publication offers help in creating a healthy post-divorce environment for your family. It lists provisions to include in a parenting plan, things to consider when deciding on living arrangements for your child, and where to go for help in resolving disagreements.

How do I share parenting with my former spouse after divorce?

Divorce changes but does not end a family. Now children are members of two families.

It may be helpful to stop and think about the following questions:

- How can I and my former spouse both remain actively involved in our child(ren)'s life?
- How do I manage parenting if my former spouse and I can't get along?
- Who should make daily decisions?
- Who should make major decisions?

Successful shared parenting is related to how well parents communicate and work with each other for the best interest of their children. What works best for some divorcing parents may not work well for others.

Children benefit when they have relationships with both parents. Separation and divorce are difficult times for most children.

Still, research finds that children tend to adjust to divorce with less difficulty when they are able to maintain the family relationships that were important to them prior to the divorce and their parents are able to cooperate and be generally supportive of one another.

According to Constance Ahrons, Ph.D., parents need to develop a "limited partnership" so that they can co-parent. The partnership needs to be clear, include both households, and be practical.

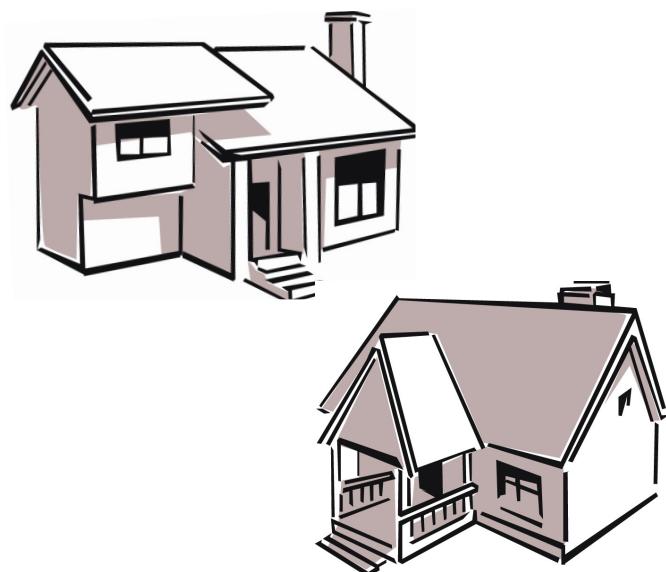
In Montana these partnerships are outlined in a "parenting plan," a contract that is developed between divorcing parents. The parenting plan replaces the custody agreement. In Montana joint custody is usually

granted unless there is a legal or documentable reason for one parent to have sole custody of the children.

According to Maureen McInnis, a member of the Montana Mediation Association who operates a custodial mediation practice in Great Falls, the more parents can cooperate together the more they can stay in control of their parenting plan. If parents cannot cooperate, then the state must step in to make decisions.

Deciding on living arrangements for your child

Unless there is some compelling reason that a child should not live with one parent (such as documented abuse), parents should work out where the child will live and how often the child will spend time



Help your child understand that she or he has two 'homes.'
Some families help their children by using terms like "my Colorado home" and "my Montana home" or "my home on 5th Street and "my home on 29th Street."

Provisions to include in a parenting plan

Maureen McInnis, a member of the Montana Mediation Association who operates a custodial mediation practice in Great Falls, suggests that parents include the following provisions in their parenting plan:

- Parent time with the child
- Vacations
- Transportation
- Medical decisions
- Religious upbringing
- Medical costs/insurance
- Telephone calls
- Items to have in both households
- Information to be exchanged between parents
- Involvement with other adults
- Supporting the other parent
- Controlling conflict
- Geographical moves
- Holidays and birthdays
- Child care
- Policy of re-arranging parenting time
- School decisions
- Community activities
- Sports/clubs/extra curricular activities
- Shopping for clothing
- Items to be shared across households
- Grandparent visits
- Consistency between households
- Communicating with each other
- Child support
- Residential or physical custody*

*Solely for the purpose of all other state and federal statutes, which require a designation of custody, one parent is listed as the custodian of the child in the parenting plan. This does not however, affect either parent's rights and responsibilities under a parenting plan. If parents do not specify one parent as the child's custodian in the parenting plan, then the parent with whom the child lives most of the time is listed as the custodian.

with the other parent. There are a variety of possible arrangements. Recognize that the arrangements may need to change as the child gets older or if family situations change.

Some of the possible arrangements include:

- The child lives primarily with one parent and spends alternating weekends at the other parent's home.
- The child lives with one parent during the school year and the other during school vacations.
- The parents split the week and the child moves from one house to the other, usually midweek.
- The child spends six months with one parent and six months with the other. Some families may alternate years.
- The child stays in the same house but the parents move in and out on an arranged schedule.

When deciding which arrangement is best for your family:

- Consider the child's age and temperament.
- Keep life consistent for the child as much as possible.
- Keep the child in frequent contact with the nonresidential parent.
- Provide a regular schedule so that the child knows what to expect.
- Help your child understand that she/he has two "homes." One parent said that he and his former spouse speak of their daughter's Montana home and Colorado home rather than saying "Mom's House" and "Dad's House."

Creating a healthy post-divorce environment for your family

Although it can be difficult, parents need to put the best interests of their child(ren) first. All parents disagree from time to time, even parents who are married.

To help your family through the divorce, remember the following:

- Focus on your child's needs to help him or her through the divorce process.
- Accept that your former spouse may parent differently from you.
- Keep routines as much as possible so that the child has consistency in his or her life.

- Encourage your child to spend as much time as possible with the nonresidential parent.
- Help your child to keep in contact with the nonresidential parent through phone calls and letters or emails.
- Make the transition between homes as smooth as possible.
- Let the child know that he/she has two homes.
- Avoid putting your child in the middle of disagreements.
- Keep from making negative comments about the other parent in the presence of the child.
- Communicate directly with your former spouse rather than sending messages through your child.
- Avoid disagreeing with your former spouse in front of the child.
- Be flexible in implementing the parenting plan.
- Encourage a positive relationship between your child and your former spouse.
- Get help for yourself if you are having difficulty coping with the divorce or shared parenting.
- Handle child support and other financial issues with the other parent, a mediator, or the legal system, not through your child.

Learning how to share parenting

One of the best things you can do for yourself and your children is to learn more about parenting through divorce. Some family court judges recommend that divorcing parents attend a co-parenting class. Consider attending a class for divorcing parents. Parenting after divorce is different than parenting in a two-parent

family, and the information can help support you in your parenting efforts. Your attorney, a mediator or your local Extension agent may be able to help you locate co-parenting classes or other resources in your area.

When disagreements cannot be worked out between parents

If you and your former spouse disagree on issues and the two of you cannot work them out, see a counselor or mediator to try and work through your differences. Divorcing parents who use a mediator generally have less costly divorces and are less likely to end up in court. A mediator is an individual trained to help facilitate differences between parents so that they can come to an agreement. Many family mediators have a counseling or legal background. Mediators in Montana are required to have 40 hours of training in mediation. For information on guidelines for mediators or to locate a mediator in your community contact:

Montana Mediation Association
P.O. Box 1984
Great Falls, MT 59403
(406)241-2422

References

- Ahrons, C. R. (1994) *The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Comes Apart*. New York: HarperCollins Publisher.
- Ricci, I. (1997). *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster Publisher.

Acknowledgements

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Tips for Working Through a Parenting Plan

One method for working through parenting plans and co-parenting after divorce is the FASTUR method, developed by Dr. Isolina Ricci.

- F** be Flexible and Fair – Sometimes unexpected situations arise that may require some flexibility in how shared parenting is carried out day to day.
- A** be Active – Be proactive in solving situations when they arise.
- S** use Substitutes – Try to find substitutes to solve problems.
- T** make Trades – Be willing to trade some responsibilities or time with the other parent if needed.
- U** Understand and be Understood – Try to understand the situation from the other parent's viewpoint.
- R** be Respectful – Treat your former spouse with respect even if you disagree with him or her.



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