



Building Stepfamilies That Work®

Dealing With the Ex: General Information

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The high road is always a good choice.

Obligations

Parents have no obligation to their biological children to remain as a couple. However, biological parents do have an obligation to their children to parent them. Kids don't need their biological parents to be a couple, but they do need their biological parents to co-parent them effectively.

When your biofamily was coming to an end, did you and your former spouse meet **together** with the child(ren) to tell them explicitly:

- You are not to blame for the marriage breaking down.
- Mom and dad won't be getting back together as a couple ever again, but
- we will continue to work together to parent you, to the best of our ability.

If you haven't done so, and/or you are currently embroiled in conflict with your former spouse that impacts the child(ren), they are at risk of:

- Feeling responsible for the marriage breakdown (Research shows this has a "sleeper effect" and may produce "reactive" misbehaviour years after the breakdown.)
- Misbehaving in an attempt to reunite their biological parents, and
- Experiencing enduring emotional, social, achievement, and relationship difficulties.

Clearly, establishing an effective co-parenting relationship serves your child(ren)'s best interests; and the sooner this is accomplished, the better off they will be.

The Co-Parenting Relationship

Anger: If anger and conflict are in abundance, at least one of you may not yet have acknowledged that the family, **as you knew it**, has died. Our nature dictates that we must grieve such losses before we can "move on". For most of us, it's easier to be angry than sad. [See: *A Letter to the Ex*, and *Grief: A Process*]

"Bad Mouthing": Recognize that your ex-spouse loves your children, and they love him/her. Don't "bad mouth" your ex-spouse because it harms the children—and it will surely come back to haunt you. Stop calling him/her the "Ex" (which stands for wrong) in front of the kids; and do your best to think only positive or neutral thoughts about him/her. It may be necessary to have a support available to you so you can

constructively vent your frustrations regarding your ex-spouse. Sometimes your current partner can fulfill this role, but sometimes not—so check it out carefully rather than making an

assumption about their willingness or ability to support you in this way. **Note:** Often the current partner is displeased with what they see as your failing to “stand up to your ex-spouse”. When this is true, their displeasure is certainly justified because a pattern of submissive behaviour frequently invites “bullying” by the ex-spouse. Assertiveness, not aggressiveness is the remedy.

The Relationship Goal: The goal is to have a neutral relationship with your ex-spouse—one like you have with the 7-11 store clerk: pleasant, functional, and direct—and one that enables you to communicate effectively about parenting. **Caution:** Being “too helpful” or “too friendly” with your ex-spouse is likely to be very unsettling for your current partner.

Focus on Needs: Providing the ex-spouse with neutral information about the child(ren)’s needs (see: *Mediating Agreement on Parenting Issues* (article), *Because Life Goes On* (booklet), and “*A Letter to the Ex*”) often helps to focus on the parenting task (which is critical), and away from the “baggage” left from the former relationship (which couldn’t be resolved when you were in a relationship together, and likely won’t be resolved now either.)

Direct Communication: Don’t put your kids in the middle of your communications with your ex-spouse. It is too stressful for them. Keep in mind that children will often tell horror stories to one parent about the other in order to align with, or offer support to the parent they are with at the moment. Don’t “pump” your kids for information about your ex-spouse. To do so puts them in a loyalty conflict. Communicate directly.

Sanctions: Resist trying to be the head of two households. Don’t expect your ex-spouse to follow through with your sanctions; and be clear about your willingness to follow through with the sanctions your ex-spouse imposes upon the child(ren). Encourage the kids to be respectful of the ex-spouse’s house rules when they are staying there.

Support Payments: When support payments (finally) begin, the parent making them often becomes much more involved with the child(ren). This increased involvement is likely to be seen as very disruptive to the home where the child(ren) have been residing. Allowing a window of time for an adjustment of the schedules in the residential home is likely to avoid many hard feelings. See the *Mediating Agreement on Parenting Issues* article for information that outlines occasions where difficulties are likely to occur.

When possible, the use of a dedicated, automatic checking account for support payments (with an overdraft sufficient to cover at least one payment) will avoid considerable co-parenting conflict and spare the child(ren) of having their schedules disrupted and visits cancelled each time an unanticipated expense arises, making the support payment late.

If an increase in support payments (say \$50 more per month) is a thorny issue; ask yourself if you would be willing to take on feeling as you do over the issue for: 24 hours per day, seven days per week, 365 days per year—and all for the sum of \$50 per month. If you would decline a job such as that, perhaps making/receiving the additional payment really isn’t worth “digging your heels in” over.

Co-operation: “My ex-spouse won’t co-operate with anything.” This may be true; and there may be little that you can do about it directly. However, you are totally in control of what **you** will and won’t do; and how accommodating **you** will or won’t be. Have a look at what is possible on your part. Most people smile in reply when you smile at them. However, it might take some time with your ex-spouse, especially if trust has been shattered. [Trust is like cabbage. It’s easy to destroy and takes a long time to re-grow.]

If face-to-face meetings are too heated, try telephone calls. If telephone calls (use call display if necessary) or voice messages don't work, try letters, faxes or emails. If letters, faxes or emails don't work, make it clear that you won't respond until the messages received are civil. If checking to see if they are civil is distressing to you, have someone else preview the messages; or simply stop checking them for a period of time. A neutral, "third party" sometimes provides for functional communication when all else fails.

Remember: If you consistently choose the "high road", time is on your side.

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