

## 101 Ways to Make a Difficult Divorce Easier on Your Kids

The following is a list of things you can do to make your children's lives easier after a divorce. Read these tips as reminders of what you and your co-parent need to be doing to ease the stress of divorce on your children. Remember that the reason you do these things is that if you don't, your children will join the ranks of those who become emotionally hurt by the process of divorce.

If you are going through or have gone through a very bad divorce, you might have concluded that the situation is beyond help. It isn't. It takes two people to have a conflict with one another. Don't let an angry ex-spouse coax you into battle and prevent you from doing what is best for your children.

Very few children want their parents to be divorced, but kids who have to live with the disappointment of growing up in separate families do best when they can say that their Mom and Dad spared them years of bickering, confrontations and immature behavior. Help your child avoid a lifetime of being embarrassed, hurt and confused by your failure to develop a business-like and cooperative relationship with your ex. It's your choice, Mom and Dad - please do the right thing.

### Common Courtesy:

1. Clean your children's weekend clothes before you send them back to the co-parent.
2. Send clean clothes when the children leave for visitation.
3. *Prepare* your children when it is time for a telephone call from the other parent. Say, "Mom (or Dad) is going to call to see how your day went. When the phone rings I want you to stop what you are doing and talk for a while."
4. Do not snoop in on telephone conversations with the co-parent. If something bad happens during the call, you'll hear about it soon enough.
5. During transitional visitation changes, try to make the very first thing you say to the co-parent something positive.
6. Ensure your co-parent has access to information about school, sports, activities and doctor's appointments – *for your kids' sakes*. Even if you are the custodial parent, you are not the only parent.
7. Stay on neutral topics and be the bigger person when it comes to having conversations with your ex.
8. If you have to cancel or are late for a pick-up or drop-off, *first* tell the co-parent and *then* get on the phone with the child to explain and apologize.
9. Be flexible and whenever possible arrange make-up visits.
10. Do not encourage your child to bring pets or other living things home to the other parent's house *without asking first*.
11. Encourage your child to write, call or send cards on special days.
12. Provide written instructions to the co-parent on how to dispense any medications that might be necessary.
13. Children *rarely* refuse visitation when they are given lots of prompting and advance preparation. *Prepare the children well in advance by speaking positively about it.*
14. Don't make excessive demands to change visitation days and times. Everyone has their limits of tolerance.
15. Being the custodial parent doesn't give you the right to make decisions that disrupt your co-parent's schedule. Look at the days and times that he or she has visitation as being *unchangeable in any way until the co-parent approves*.
16. Do not reinforce behavior that you know the other parent disapproves of. If you feel that it is absolutely necessary to go against your co-parent, *tell the co-parent first, don't let the child bring the news home and experience the co-parent's disapproval or ire for you.*

**Read also "Hiding Behind Your Children in Divorce"**

**Conflict Resolution and Anger Control:**

17. Stay outside of the co-parent's home, unless you are explicitly invited to enter. Intruding on the co-parent's residence, even if it used to be your home too, is an intrusive, aggressive action.
18. Monitor your body language and your facial gestures. Angry body language and non-verbal behavior increase tension. Smile, for your kid's sake - it won't break your face.
19. When you feel like screaming, lower your voice instead, it will get more attention - growling in a low voice or mumbling obscenities under your breath doesn't count.
20. Pushing, tapping on the shoulder, poking and other kinds of touching during an argument is going to be called "abuse" whether you think it's abuse or not. Think twice about touching the co-parent *in any way* and remember jail is not a fun place.
21. Saying things like "I'm going to kill you" will often also buy you a night in jail, even if you've never even swatted a gnat. Say less, not more, during an argument.
22. If you are not certain that you can control your temper, bring someone who can help keep you in line. Do not bring anyone who will egg you on to do something stupid.
23. Do not tell your personal business to people who will incite your anger and make you feel worse about yourself or your co-parent. Talk to people who will help you cope and move on with your life.
24. Respond to provocation by saying, "I don't want to fight. I'll be on my way in a minute." Then do what you came to do and move on.
25. When you feel like your buttons are being pushed, understand that the sooner you get out of the situation, the sooner the hostile interaction ends. Go home, leave the house for a few minutes, or stop talking.
26. Don't follow the co-parent around after an argument, *especially* if your child is around. There's a good chance you're going to be accused of harassing or stalking.
27. Don't call the co-parent up repeatedly and hang-up the phone. In many states this is considered a crime, and even if it isn't, this behavior is not very gratifying, and will probably get you in trouble.
28. Giving in on stupid little issues, isn't giving in - it's being smart enough to avoid a major confrontation that will give you even more aggravation and a possible expensive trip to court later.
29. Be the first one to end the argument. Give the co-parent the last word.
30. Keep your mouth shut until the co-parent finishes talking. Nothing escalates an argument quicker than one person interrupting, talking over or cutting the other person off.
31. Don't lecture the co-parent. Give them an opportunity to respond. Then listen. Ask permission before offering unwanted advice or suggestions. Nobody likes to be lectured at.
32. Watch the physical space between you when you are talking. Close proximity during heated conversations is threatening.

**Kids & Questions:**

33. As a general rule, the fewer questions you ask a child, the more they will tell you.
34. Do not quiz your children about what they ate at the co-parent's house. This makes your child feel they aren't cared for. If you think your child is being starved, speak to the co-parent directly.
35. Do not ask your child to reveal the whereabouts of certain possessions that you are looking to retrieve from the co-parent's house. Making your child a spy will backfire in the long run.
36. If your child asks you questions about the co-parent's life or about the specifics of your divorce, just say "That's grown-up talk. That's not something we can talk about."
37. Do *not* instruct your child to ask the co-parent to purchase things.
38. Don't spend phone time peppering your children with questions about what they are doing. Most young children do not like to speak on the phone, mostly because they do not like to be interrupted from what they are doing. Learn to make appropriate "small talk". This is how a typical phone conversation should go: Say what *you* did; then ask, "How was your day", then listen, say, "I love you and I will see you soon."
39. If the co-parent asks questions or makes comments that should not be spoken about in front

of your child say, "If this is important to you, we can talk about it in private."

40. Do not ask your child questions about the other parent's boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife. You make your child feel like a traitor to the parent they are "reporting" on.

41. Do ask your child questions about where s/he got a suspicious-looking welt or bruise. If the child says he or she was hit or beaten, first call your co-parent to hear and listen to what s/he says happened. *Then* call child welfare authorities if you think there was abuse.

42. When a child returns from visitation, let him/her settle down and readjust to your home. Do not ask any questions, no matter how innocent sounding first thing. The last thing a child (or anyone) wants to deal with are questions as soon as s/he walks through the door.

*Read also "The Divorce Decision: To File or Reconcile?"*

### **How to Talk to the Co-Parent:**

43. Say "I think we have different ideas about that," not "You're a liar," or "You're mistaken/wrong."

44. Say "Hello" and "Good-bye" to one another when the kids are there. Model respect and good manners.

45. Praise/Acknowledge your co-parent when he or she does something well. How you treat the parent of the same gender identity as your child (e.g. how Mom treats Dad when there is a son) is likely to be similar to how your child will be treated by a future partner of *your* gender. (e.g. Daughter-in-law is likely to treat son as Mom treated Dad.)

46. Avoid using sarcastic comments like, "Nice car, now we'd all be happy if you would only pay the child support on time." As a parent, you are modeling ineffective behavior.

47. Say, "**I have a different idea about that**" as opposed to "You don't know what you are talking about," or "I disagree" – these polarize you and pit you against one another.

48. Say, "I think it would make a positive difference for our child if you spend more time with him," instead of "The poor kid is miserable because you don't pay enough attention to him." Better yet, empower your child to speak up for him/herself if s/he wants more time with a parent, as soon as they're old enough to do so. "Mom, can we spend some more time together?"

49. Say, "That's a good point," when the other person is right and you are mistaken.

50. Say, "You did a good job" or "I really appreciate that you . . . , " instead of, "It's about time you starting pulling your weight around here."

51. Learn how to apologize for insensitive, rude or inappropriate behavior. You want your children to be able to do this. If you don't, they won't.

52. Resist the impulse to say, "No", to your co-parent without thinking first. "Let me think about that" is better . . . then make and keep a promise to get back to your co-parent by a specific time.

53. Don't talk about child support, visitation issues or other adult topics of conversation in front of your kids. *Ever*.

### **Creating a Favorable Impression of the Co-Parent:**

54. Do not encourage your children to keep diaries and written records about how horrible their mother or father is. Parents often do this to assist their own court battles. This is using your child for your own ends. If you pressure your child to chronicle every negative thing that happens with your co-parent, you are pitting your child against that parent. This directly damages children. You are requiring them to see and experience the co-parent as you do. This intensifies their anger and alienates the co-parent. In addition, by using your kids in this way, you are setting them up to be used by others as well. The more anger you make your kids feel towards your co-parent, the more likely they'll suffer from low self-esteem (e.g. if girl is being incited to anger at her mother, she will likely identify with the female mother she's rejecting), depression and anti-social behavior. Do your best to support and empower your children to address matters respectfully, and repair poor parent-child relationships; Do not make them worse by asking your children to channel your negative judgments about your co-parent.

55. Do not teach your children all about the co-parent's faults, problems, tendency to be unreliable, etc. If that is the case, they will learn on their own. Do help your child deal respectfully with the other parent's challenges. Affirm the co-parent's love for the child. If you teach them to

not believe in the co-parent's love, ultimately they will blame themselves for this.

56. Encourage visitation unless you are certain that the child is in serious danger at the co-parent's house. Talk about your co-parent's good points and remind your child that s/he is loved by *both* parents. How you teach them to relate to their co-parent, is how you are teaching them to relate to their friends, teachers, future employers and partners.

57. *Prepare* the child when it's time to return to the co-parent by being positive and supportive. (e.g. "Have a good time!" "You love your Dad/Mom and s/he loves you!" "I'm so glad you have 2 parents that love you!" "We're so lucky to be parents that have you for a son/daughter!")

58. Do not allow your child to complain excessively about the co-parent. Listen to the things that cause concerns about how the child is being treated, but understand that children will exaggerate or even make up stories because they know it gets your attention. Empower your child to speak up, *respectfully*, for him/herself by asking for what s/he DOES want, instead of complaining about everything s/he doesn't like – the latter creates depression and damages all relationships, not just the relationship with the co-parent.

59. Do not reinforce your children with attention for calling you to complain about the co-parent's setting limits the kids do not like. Discourage your child from "playing one parent off the other." If you teach your kids to disrespect one adult's limits, they will disrespect others as well.

60. Actively discourage your child from using derogatory language about the co-parent. They'll do it to you too, eventually, and do it to others. Instead, ask your child to express their feelings without blame, and ask your child about what s/he might say to the co-parent to ask respectfully for what they want/need. Help your child rehearse doing this in a polite, respectful way.

61. Encourage your child to appreciate what they have. People who are grateful, are happier and kinder. You sabotage this gratitude and joy if you speak about things how much better life would be *if only the co-parent* paid more money, did more of what you want, etc. This creates your kids seeing themselves as victims. Model being in a state of gratitude and appreciation.

62. Do not talk about how the co-parent loved someone else more and left you to be with someone else. This pressures and burdens your child to feel responsible for your wellbeing – you are the adult responsible for what you make of your life, *not your child*.

63. Do not talk about the co-parent's "new family." This leaves your kids feeling "replaced." Do talk about a "new sibling."

64. Do not allow your child to avoid visitation if they give you excuses, e.g. "It's boring" "She's mean," etc. A parent does not deserve to be separated from his or her child because s/he can't entertain your child as well as you can. *After getting permission from your co-parent*, offer ideas about things your child likes to do and make helpful suggestions. ("I have a few thoughts about what might work . . . Are you interested?" Respect a "no.") It is your child's job, ultimately, to entertain him/herself and to plan and prepare for that as much as possible in *both* homes.

#### **If You Still Live in the Same Residence:**

65. Do not allow your young children to sleep in the same bed as you *if* the child is uncomfortable doing anything else. When you and the co-parent live in separate residences the adjustment will be much more difficult for your child.

66. Do not fight over who puts the children to bed. One parent takes odd days, the other parent takes even days. Set a schedule the child can count on.

67. Do not sequester the child behind locked doors. If you need private time, leave the house.

68. Be mindful of what you do around mealtimes. If you can't sit together as a family, do not exclude the co-parent from eating with the child. Set a schedule for switching meal times if you need to.

69. Do not mock or make fun of the way the co-parent cooks, looks or anything else! Do not fight or belittle your co-parent's efforts. (Yes, people do this to their kids!)

70. Do not bicker over who takes the child to school or picks the child up – work it out without exposing your child to your conflict with your co-parent.

71. Share weekend time. Discuss how you will share the time, and work out a schedule, when your children are NOT present. If you can't agree, ask your lawyers or an impartial third party to help. The same goes for holiday and vacation times. Do not make any assumptions and do not "claim" the time before discussing it with the co-parent as this provokes tension that will leak onto

your child(ren). Putting your children in the middle, in any of the above ways, increases the likelihood that they will have serious trouble adjusting in healthy ways.

**If You are the Primary (Custodial, Residential) Parent:**

72. Have your child prepared to go to visitation *on time*. If the visiting parent has to wait *more than five minutes, he or she is waiting too long*.

73. Do not make promises about what the co-parent is going to do or not do on his or her visitation time. First, it's not your business. Second, let the co-parent and your child have their own relationship. Third, you risk setting your child up for unnecessary disappointment and hurt.

74. Do not tell your child you love them a hundred times before they leave to go to the other parent's house. Once is enough. This pulls on their hearts and makes them anxious about leaving.

75. Do not inject your child with guilt before he or she leaves for visitation by saying things like, "I'll miss you until you come home," or "I'll be lonely." The only thing this serves to do is sabotage the quality of the child's experience with the other parent. In this same category, don't say things like "The cat will miss you," "The iguana will miss you," "The living room sofa will miss you," etc. You get the point.

76. Do not feed your child a large meal right before they are about to go have a meal with your co-parent. This sabotages your child's time with the co-parent.

77. Make sure *all play dates are out of the house at least one half hour before* the co-parent comes for pick-up. Make it easy for your child to transition to the co-parent.

78. Do not let your child know that you are planning to do something exciting and fun while the child is at the co-parent's home. For example, don't say, "While you are at Dad's I'm going to keep myself busy by looking for new toys for the house." Or "While you're gone, I'll be in Hawaii!" You are interfering with your child feeling good about being wherever they are.

[Read also "Re-Discovering Yourself and Your Passions after Divorce"](#)

**If You are the Visiting Parent:**

79. Do not demand hugs and kisses from your children when it appears they are uncomfortable in front of the co-parent. Notice their reactions and respect these. Your demands only make them feel more uncomfortable. Let them warm up.

80. Don't cry or carry on excessively at the end of a visitation, especially if you are going to see the child again in a few days. You are modeling suffering over small things in life. If you are calm and pleasant your child will feel more comfortable coming, and the quality of your visitation will improve.

81. Do not encourage your child to call the co-parent and beg for more time or a sleepover. This only makes the co-parent look like "the bad guy" if it is not possible. Changes in visitation arrangements should be made *with the co-parent only*.

82. If you are the visiting parent and your child has a planned after school activity or a doctor's appointment, *follow that schedule, not your own*. Keep the child's life as predictable as possible.

83. If you are the visiting parent be sure to have two sets of "play clothes" one set of dress clothes, a pair of sneakers, underwear and a pair of shoes for each of your children at your home at all times.

84. Children can travel back and forth with most mild colds and stomach aches. Ask yourself, however, whether you think it is best to put a grumpy child through a long car ride, or a short visit when what s/he needs is to rest and recover. When in doubt let the pediatrician or doctor advise on what is best.

85. *Children need to have chores and responsibilities at BOTH residences*. Just because the child spends less time with you than the other parent doesn't mean you have less responsibility to teach your children how to grow up to handle their own stuff, and to be responsible for their share and their impact on the family at *both* houses.

86. Do not lavish your child with expensive gifts every time you see him/her for visitation. Some children resent this behavior and you risk the children's feeling like you're trying to "buy" or "bribe"

them. You are teaching them to be bought, and that Love = getting stuff from people. Teach them to value mutual respect, understanding and emotional closeness.

87. Do not give your child important papers, documents or child support money to pass along to the co-parent. This applies to the primary custodial parent as well.

88. *Do something relaxing* before you take the child back to the co-parent's house. Don't make your child excitable by wrestling, running around or doing any activity that is going to make the child hyper before s/he gets back to the co-parent.

89. If you are the visiting parent, be sure to have the proper car seats and safety equipment.

90. Be prompt on your pick-ups and drop offs. Call ahead when you are going to be more than a 2-5 minutes late. If your pick up time isn't viable, consider changing the court order to times that actually work for everyone, rather than being consistently late. Lateness builds up resentment and distrust for your kids and your co-parent. You are teaching them that they can't count on you to be reliable and do what you say you'll do, by when you said you'd do it.

91. Agree on bed times and curfew times with your co-parent.

92. Agree on food restrictions and permission to "eat junk" with the other parent, especially if your child is on a special diet.

93. If the child is being punished or restricted by the other parent *do not relieve that restriction* without having a conversation with your co-parent. If you do not present a "united front" with respect to discipline, your child will violate limits with you *both*, and with other authority figures.

#### **Regarding Your and the Co-Parent's Boyfriends, Girlfriends, New Husband or Wife:**

94. *Do not let your children call anyone else "Mom" or "Dad,"* unless the co-parent approves or if the co-parent is totally absent from the child's life. It disrespects your co-parent, and the half of your child that is genetically like that co-parent.

95. *Wait at least 8 months to a year* after dating, before you introduce your children to boyfriends/girlfriends. Children who have been through a divorce or separation with their parents need to be protected from being exposed to another intimate relationship that may be here today and gone tomorrow. Wait until you have solid reason to believe the relationship is going to be permanent or at least very long-term. Children often feel guilty when faced with another mother or father figure. They feel disloyal to their parent if they like someone else. They can like the new person, and reassure them that they already have one mother/father and that no one can replace your co-parent. Contact should be very slow and very gradual over a relatively *long* period of time. You want to model being discriminating and self-respecting in your dating habits, if you want your kids to do the same.

96. Never let your child see you sleep with a boyfriend or girlfriend unless it is a permanent relationship. Never allow your child to sleep in the same bed with you and a boyfriend or girlfriend. Kids will interpret this without understanding all the adult factors that go into making a wise decision to be intimately involved with another person.

97. *Unless you have permission from the co-parent,* do not allow a stepparent, boyfriend or girlfriend to bathe, take your child to the bathroom or attend to your child's intimate needs.

98. Do not allow a stepparent, boyfriend or girlfriend to physically discipline your child. Ever. Furthermore, all the research confirms that physical forms of discipline are ineffective.

99. Do not encourage your boyfriend, girlfriend or present spouse to fight your battles for you. Communication with the co-parent is YOUR responsibility. The only exception to this rule is if the co-parent can get more accomplished talking to your significant other, because that person has more good sense than you do.

100. Do not permit your boyfriend, girlfriend or new spouse to say anything negative about the co-parent in front of your children. *If negative things are said about the co-parent, your significant other should not be around your children.*

#### **Get Help:**

101. If you can't get along with the co-parent, find someone who specializes in co-parenting to help you. Try contacting a mental health professional or community mental health center that has co-parenting programs for divorced parents, or mental health professionals who specialize in this

kind of work. Find out which court handles divorce and visitation cases and call to see whether they offer a course or seminar on co-parenting.

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