

Appendix 8

FIFTEEN RULES OF CO-PARENTING*

Attorneys should provide their clients the following advice regarding co-parenting and managing post-divorce issues as a handout. These insights are based on 15 years' clinical experience with divorcing parents and their children.

1. *Cooperate with your former spouse on behalf of your children.*

The best indicator of how well your children will adjust to the divorce is the level of civility between their parents. Children who have a close and supportive relationship with both parents have fewer problems.

Examine your communication style. If necessary, get feedback from a neutral third party or use a mediator to resolve problems. Stop fights before they escalate. Recognize the beginnings of a fight (body tension, negative or defensive thinking, etc.). Work hard to negotiate with the other parent, avoid placing blame or using the words "never" and "always." Remember that having different household routines and rules doesn't mean one is wrong; it means only that one is different.

2. *Facilitate visitation with the other parent.* Help your children understand that after the divorce they have two homes. Going to the other parent's home isn't "visiting," it is another home in which they live.

Encourage your children to be loyal to both parents. Tell them that they don't have to take sides or comfort their parents. Make it clear that they are responsible for their own feelings and happiness but not for their parents' feelings and happiness.

3. *Communicate openly about visitation.* If you will be late picking up or dropping off your children, let the other parent know. Spend

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time working and playing with your children. Do not develop a relationship based on being a “fun mom” or “Disneyland dad.” Spend real time with your children so that fun and work go on at both homes. If you live near the other parent, occasionally have the child spend a weekday and a weekend with the noncustodial parent.

4. *Treat your former spouse as a business colleague.* Check up, check in, and follow through in a responsible mature fashion. Encourage your former spouse to stay involved or get involved in school events, conferences, and extracurricular activities. Work out all plans in advance when you will both be attending an event. Let your child talk freely with the other parent at any time.
5. *Remember that visitation is for the child.* Taking the position that visitation is your “right” can have negative consequences. Even when you are upset with your child or your former spouse, continue regular visitation. Although you may want to have your child to yourself during visitation, encourage your child to invite friends over occasionally. Make your time together as normal as possible.
6. *Every child needs time alone with a parent.* Having your children move between homes in groups may cause tension among siblings. Children may complain that they never get any time alone with the custodial parent.
7. *Be honest with your children.* At times, you may need to provide a realistic view of the other parent. If during the marriage, your children witnessed serious problems, such as domestic violence, talk honestly about what happened without embellishment or distortion. Say, for example, “The fights your dad and I sometimes had were not about you. We both love you. We just had problems in our marriage that we couldn’t solve.”
8. *Expect your children to be upset about the divorce.* Let them talk openly about their feelings. Do not cry or be overly emotional during these talks. A parent’s crying often upsets the child and can become a barrier to communication. If you feel like crying, tell your child immediately what the tears are about and compose yourself as much as possible. Say, for example, “Whenever people go through a lot of things like this, they have a lot of different feelings. Being sad is part of it. I still want to talk as much as you do.”
9. *Give children the information they need to understand about the divorce.* Too often, parents have Teflon brains; whatever they

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think—especially anger—slides out of their mouths. Do not discuss adult issues—including financial matters—or negative feelings about the other parent with your children.

10. *Do everything you can to keep your child from feeling emotionally involved in the conflict.* Do not ask leading or prying questions about the other parent or ask your child to act as a messenger. Make drop-offs and pickups as painless and cordial as possible. These are stressful times for children and should not be stagings for guerilla warfare.
11. *Teach your children how to communicate their feelings of stress about being caught in the middle.* Tell older children that it is OK to say, “I don’t want to talk about this because it makes me feel uncomfortable.” Younger children can say, “That makes me feel like taffy.” The taffy concept was developed several years ago by a group of young students whose parents were getting divorced. They called themselves the “Taffy Kids” because they felt pulled and stretched just like the taffy they had seen being made at the Iowa State Fair.
12. *Find a good, solid support network for yourself.* Do not depend on your child to support you, comfort you, or understand your feelings and thoughts about the divorce. Talk with friends, see a counselor, join a post-divorce support group or a Parents Without Partners group. Plan an exercise routine and stick with it. Find activities that relax you and build them into your life. Plan one night out a week for yourself.
13. *When dating, be careful about making your new “friend” part of the family too soon.* Wait until you are reasonably sure that the relationship will be long-term. Meeting and then losing several new “friends” can be difficult for children.
14. *Teach your child good coping strategies.* Help your children see divorce-related issues as challenges rather than problems. A challenge is something that “just is” and has to be coped with. Encourage your child to participate in a divorce support group. Children need to learn that they are not alone; others are struggling with the same issues.
15. *Educate yourself about the divorce process.* Others have been through what you are experiencing; learn from their mistakes. Read some good books, such as *The Divorced Parent* by Stephanie Martson, *Mom’s House, Dad’s House* by Isolina Ricci, and *The New Peoplemaking* by Virginia Satir.