

Co-parenting across households

Co-parenting is working together with your child's other parent, to share the parenting duties and responsibilities. Parents in a couple relationship can co-parent their children. But co-parenting is typically used to describe two (or more) people parenting a child, but not as one family unit¹.

Key points about co-parenting

As parents, it's your responsibility to ensure your child is parented to the best of your ability. If you and your child's mother / other parent live in different households – which in most cases happens after a divorce or separation – finding ways to work together as best you can will help your child adapt to the change in their family structure².

Successful co-parenting requires collaboration and openness, and mothers and fathers who were once in a couple relationship but now aren't, can achieve this³. But it can be a challenge, and there is no 'one size fits all' approach: it will depend on your relationship with your child's other parent/s.

Why co-parenting can be difficult

- It's hugely challenging when a relationship breaks up: you'll need to be good at communicating and sharing your parenting responsibilities
- Both of you, as parents, have the right to be involved in key decisions about your child's welfare (for more on this, see our [Parental Responsibility](#) factsheet) – but you may not agree on these
- As a co-parenting parent, you need to put aside your personal differences and focus on what is best for your child⁴

¹ Parenting Smart 'Co-parenting after a separation' [webpage](#)

² IBB Law (2022) 'Co-parenting tips from a legal perspective' [webpage](#)

³ Stowe Family Law (2023) 'How to Successfully Co-Parent' [link](#)

⁴ Parenting Smart 'Co-parenting after a separation' [webpage](#)

- There's no law that says where children should live after divorce/separation⁵, but in practice most tend to live all or most of the time with their mother⁶. All separating and divorcing parents must cope with no longer having unlimited access to their child (or the *sense* of it), and that's tough. Both of you will feel upset and may be frustrated and angry. Finances can come into the equation too. Dads are the main breadwinner in most couple households, and if you're no longer together, the idea of now being a provider with reduced access to your child may compound your feelings of loss

What are the benefits of co-parenting?

- Strong bonds with each parent contribute to children's overall wellbeing. Research on children post-separation consistently highlights the significance of maintaining meaningful and consistent relationships with both parents⁷
- Successful co-parenting can help create stability and consistency for the child, through an agreed routine and rules across both households
- If your child sees you communicating and cooperating respectfully⁸ this can support their emotional wellbeing
- Keeping the focus on co-parenting enables you to prioritise your child and their needs. This can result in better problem-solving and help prevent misunderstandings

Co-parenting can help children continue to feel supported, loved, and connected to both parents⁹. Research shows that children whose parents can cooperate constructively after separation fare better in all areas of their lives, and that the positive effects last throughout their lifetimes¹⁰.

⁵ Lawyers and family services usually talk in terms of parents being 'resident' or 'non-resident' post-separation or divorce. Find out more on this Coram Child Law centre page [link](#)

⁶ See page 3 of this factsheet for data about this

⁷ Families Need Fathers, Research page [link](#)

⁸ National Family Mediation 'Tips for Successful Co-Parenting' blog page [Link](#)

⁹ Stowe Family Law (2023) 'How to Successfully Co-Parent' blog page [Link](#)

¹⁰ Divorce.co.uk 'What is a parenting charter?' [webpage](#)

How can I co-parent effectively?

Surprisingly little is known about the detail of how fathers and mothers succeed, fail, or muddle through as co-parents – because studies tend to focus on the ‘resident’ parent (usually the mother), and do little to account for the involvement, impacts, and challenges of the ‘non-resident’ parent (usually the father)¹¹.

As a result, it’s hard to give detailed, evidence-based advice about how a co-parenting father who lives apart from the mother can best achieve good outcomes for his child.

But in general, there’s a wealth of evidence showing that *spending time with your child* is key to fathers’ positive involvement, and to strong father-child relationships; and that when fathers are ‘not around’, children’s outcomes worsen¹².

So establishing and maintaining substantial and regular contact (even virtually, if face-to-face contact is not possible) is key. Having your child stay overnight with you regularly, if this is safe and practical, gives the best chance of achieving the father-child time that is beneficial.

Data on UK fathers’ contact with their children is patchy, but studies that track children through childhood show that¹³:

- 85% of 17-year-olds either live with or are in contact with their birth father; 53% live with both parents
- 60% of 11-year-olds with an ‘own household father’ were staying overnight with him ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’
- 36% of 14-year-olds whose birth father lived elsewhere reported staying overnight with him once a week or more; another 18% stayed at least once a month; and 22% stayed, but less often

¹¹ For this reason we at the Fatherhood Institute use the terms ‘Own household father’ and ‘Own household mother’ to describe and help quantify the importance of parents whose children move between households.

¹² For a summary, see our report [The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. Research review](#) (2023).

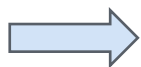
¹³ Ibid.

Traditionally, many parents and family practitioners believed that dividing young children's lives between two households could be bad for them. But in 2014, an important consensus paper¹⁴ authored by Professor Richard Warshak (Texas University) and 110 accomplished researchers and practitioners argued that, in normal circumstances, the evidence supports shared residential arrangements for children under 4 years of age whose parents live apart from each other. The paper also stressed that policymakers and decision makers should recognize that depriving young children of overnights with their fathers could compromise the quality of developing father-child relationships¹⁵.

What's the alternative?

'Parallel parenting' is an approach where both parents remain involved, but disengage from each other after separating. They intentionally limit communication and follow their own parenting style when their children are with them. This may be the most practical solution for those in high-conflict situations, but it has its drawbacks¹⁶:

- Lack of consistency in rules and routine for the child
- Emotional impact on the child due to a sustained hostile atmosphere
- Lack of communication between parents may mean that crucial clues to the child's wellbeing are overlooked
- Missed opportunities to improve co-parenting skills, potentially perpetuating a cycle of conflict.



If you and your child's mother are not able to agree on co-parenting or parallel parenting arrangements, you could try mediation (see page 8 of this factsheet) or take a case to the family courts. This guide from Citizens Advice gives an overview of your options. You may find the resources and organisations linked to from that guide, and on page 9 of this factsheet, useful.

¹⁴ Warshak, R. A. (2014). Social science and parenting plans for young children: A consensus report. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 20(1), 46–67. <https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000005>. Full text available online [link](#)

¹⁵ The authors noted that father-child relationships are vulnerable among the children of never-married and divorced parents; that studies identify overnights as a protective factor associated with increased father commitment to child rearing and reduced incidence of father drop-out; and that there was an absence of studies demonstrating any net risk of overnights.

¹⁶ National Family Mediation 'Tips for Successful Co-Parenting' blog page [Link](#)

Tips for successful co-parenting¹⁷

Acknowledge your feelings about the separation and find ways to look after yourself

- This will help you manage your emotions and allow you to focus on your child¹⁸
- Let any resentment about your separation go, as you can better use this energy elsewhere
- Remember that your child is not your emotional crutch – make sure you have a support network you can talk to¹⁹

Put your children's needs first, and consider their wishes for the future

- Establish a shared understanding of what co-parenting means – try starting with a parenting charter (see below)²⁰

Keep communication open and respectful

- Quality of interparental relationships is increasingly recognised as a primary influence on children's long-term mental health and future life chances
- Be mindful of how you speak about your co-parent in front of, or to, your child²¹. Hearing you say negative things about them can feel hurtful and confusing for your child

Set boundaries and ground rules in advance to avoid conflict later

- Create a parenting plan (see below) to manage the details of parenting decisions
- Break the news of your split together, demonstrating from the start that you are both still there for them
- Communicate directly with your co-parent on all matters, your child is not your messenger
- Don't use your child to get back at your co-parent
- Don't make your child choose between you and your co-parent²²

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Parenting Smart 'Co-parenting after a separation' [webpage](#)

¹⁹ Stowe Family Law (2023) 'How to Successfully Co-Parent' [link](#)

²⁰ Parenting Smart 'Co-parenting after a separation' [webpage](#)

²¹ Stowe Family Law (2023) 'How to Successfully Co-Parent' [link](#)

²² Ibid

Be consistent whilst maintaining the ability to be flexible

- Establish consistent rules and expectations in both households but remain willing to adjust the parenting plan to accommodate each other
- Keep your word and honour your commitments to your child, to manage their expectations²³



Always keep in mind your child's happiness, stability, and future wellbeing – look at the co-parenting arrangements from your child's perspective

Parenting charter

When you are going through the process of separation, it can be helpful to consider some 'bigger picture' questions, such as²⁴:

- What sort of childhood do we want our children to experience now that we have separated?
- How do we want our child to experience the separation itself?
- What type of parenting relationship would we like to work towards having, and what boundaries can we agree to set in place to achieve this?
- What do we want our child to say about how we handled things as parents following our separation?
- What can we do to make things most positive for our child?

To keep these goals in mind, it can be helpful to create a *Parenting charter*: a list of what your child can expect from you both, and long-term goals for this new chapter in everyone's lives.

You can read [Resolution's](#) parenting charter [here](#). It outlines the child's rights that they encourage parents to agree to. Overarching the points of this parenting charter is a desire to ensure that the child can continue to enjoy their childhood, as best as possible. Children whose parents

²³ IBB Law (2022) 'Co-parenting tips from a legal perspective' [webpage](#)

²⁴ Divorce.co.uk 'What is a parenting charter?' [webpage](#)

separate can sometimes end up being burdened with worry, so it's important to try to limit this²⁵.

Parenting plan: day-to-day

A *Parenting plan* is a written agreement to support a co-parenting approach that covers the practical issues for your child. It works even better if you involve them (where practical). Agreeing a plan shows your child you are putting them first and will always act in their best interests²⁶.

The key reasons for developing a Parenting plan²⁷ are:

- Children have the right to maintain a strong relationship with both parents
- A healthy relationship between co-parents can support the good mental wellbeing of children
- Children need consistency, stability, and effective communication from both parents to feel secure
- Sets out practical decisions about the child and helps everyone involved know what is expected of them²⁸

You can design your personal parenting plan using the Cafcass tool [here](#).

There are also a multitude of co-parenting apps available, which allow you to organise your parenting responsibilities on your computer or phone through a calendar that everyone involved has access to, can edit, and add information to²⁹. Read an overview of the available apps [here](#).

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Cafcass 'how a parenting plan can help' [webpage](#)

²⁷ Parenting Smart 'Co-parenting after a separation' [webpage](#)

²⁸ Cafcass 'how a parenting plan can help' [webpage](#)

²⁹ Separ8 'Co-parenting apps – which one to choose' [webpage](#)

Parenting plan: holidays

When it comes to celebrating holidays or organising school holidays, it's important to plan ahead. Talk to your co-parent and try to take a child-centred approach³⁰:

- If you are travelling with your child, ensure to provide your co-parent with all the details and contact information
- Actively support your child to maintain contact with your co-parent whilst in your care
- Find creative ways to include your co-parent, if possible

You can download summer holiday and Christmas Parenting plans from National Family Mediation [here](#).

Mediation

Keeping things amicable works best for everyone, but this is not always possible. If you're struggling, mediation services can help you develop a working, co-parenting relationship with your child's other parent³¹.

Family mediation, through a neutral third party, can help teach you and your co-parent how to express your concerns and needs effectively, and give you tools and strategies to resolve conflict³².

If you and the other parent agree, your child can also be consulted during mediation – this gives the child a voice and an opportunity to share their worries and concerns, without the pressure of feeling responsible for decision-making or that they must take sides³³.

³⁰ IBB Law (2022) 'Co-parenting tips from a legal perspective' [webpage](#)


³¹ Ibid

³² National Family Mediation 'Tips for successful co-parenting' [webpage](#)

³³ National Family Mediation 'What is child inclusive mediation?' [webpage](#)

How to support your child through your separation³⁴

Find time and space to listen to your child. They might be scared to show you how they feel; it's your job to reassure them and encourage them to speak up. Give them extra attention so they know you care about them.

 *Read more about building secure relationships with children – what they look like, why they matter, and how to build them – on this [Parenting Smart page](#).*

How might your child react?

- Trying to be braver than they are
- Being argumentative and grumpy
- Feeling frightened or panicky
- Cutting off from their thoughts and feelings
- [Older children] A lack of concentration which can affect their schoolwork
- [Older children] Engaging in risk behaviour like substance misuse or underage sex
- Ignoring the situation
- Disbelief
- Being easily upset
- Having difficulty sleeping
- Having accidents

Resources

One Plus One's [Separating Better app](#)

National Family Mediation's [info page](#) for parents

[Family Separation Support Hub](#) – one of [OnlyDads'](#) resources to support families through separation

Family Lives confidential [helpline](#)

Resolution's 'Parenting through Separation' [guide](#) (purchase)

Families Need Fathers provides links to [research](#), a collection of [factsheets](#) grouped thematically, and a more extensive [list of other organisations](#)

³⁴ Parenting Smart 'I'm going through a break up and want to support my child' [webpage](#)