

# The Golden Rules of Coparenting

## Fifteen ways to help your child thrive

By John N. Hartson

Coparenting during and after the divorce is critical to the healthy development of your children. The following suggestions are designed to help you remain focused on what is most important – the best interests of your children. Remember, no matter how you feel at any given moment, your children are and should be your primary focus. They are much more important than your anger or the antics of your soon to be ex-spouse.

### 1. Cooperate with your former spouse.

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. Are you speaking with the other parent in a normal and civil tone of voice or are you shouting instructions, name calling, or badgering? Take note of your facial expressions and body language. Are you glowering, frowning, or do you have a pleasant and/or neutral expression? Do you feel tense and hostile or as if you are walking on eggshells? Are your exchanges more tentative than you want them to be? Try to address and deal with the other parent without emotion, as you would a business associate. If that doesn't work, think "foreign student" – someone not completely fluent in your language, who requires patience, understanding, and calm and measured speech.

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, louder than normal voice, etc.) Work hard to negotiate differences. In conversations with the other parent, avoid placing blame or using the words "never" and "always."

Remember, having different household routines and rules does not mean that one is wrong; it means only that they are different.

### 2. Facilitate parenting time with the other parent.

Work with your ex-spouse to develop a parenting-time plan that meets the developmental needs of your children from the time of divorce through age 18. Recognize that the needs of children change as they get older. Create a plan that changes over time to best meet your child's needs.

Encourage your children to be loyal to both parents. Tell them that they don't have to take sides or comfort either parent. Make it clear that they are responsible for their own feelings and happiness, but not for their parents' feelings. Be flexible and, if the needs of the child change, be willing to change the plan, even if it is well established.

### 3. Communicate openly about parenting time.

Let the other parent know when you will be late picking up or dropping off your children. Spend 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 some weekdays with the

secondary parent to avoid “weekend only” parenting times.

#### **4. Treat your former spouse as a business colleague.**

Check up, check in, and follow through in a responsible and mature fashion. Encourage your former spouse to stay involved or get involved in school events, conferences, and extracurricular activities. Work out 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 parenting time is *for the child*.**

Taking the position that parenting time is your “right” can have negative consequences. Even when you are upset with your child or your former spouse, continue spending regular parenting time with the child.

Although you may want to have your child to yourself, encourage your child to invite friends over occasionally. Make your time together as normal as possible. Do not punish the child by denying or reducing contact with the other parent.

#### **6. Every child needs time alone with each parent.**

Having your children move between homes in groups may cause tension among siblings. Children may complain that they never get time alone with the secondary 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 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 the divorce.**

Too often, parents have “Teflon brains”: Whatever they think – especially in 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 pick-ups as painless and cordial as possible. These are stressful times for children and should not be stagings for guerrilla 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 taffy they had seen being made at the Iowa State Fair.

**12. Find a good 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, and 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.

**13. When you start 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. Join a support group, see a mental health professional, or read some good books.

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