

# Shared Custody:

## Increasing Benefits and Reducing Strains

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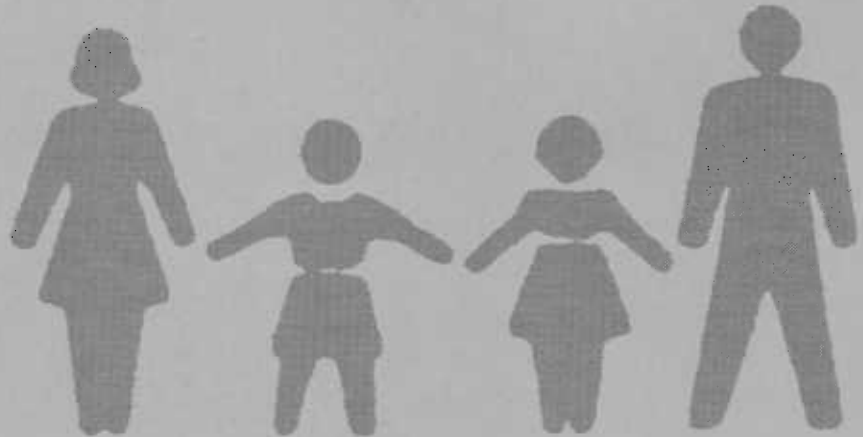
**D**ivorce is a long process—a process of reorganizing family life. When the couple has children, the parents continue to have a relationship—not as spouses, but as co-parents.

For many years, research on divorce focused on the adults. Now researchers are beginning to focus on how divorce impacts children. *What happens to children after their parents divorce?*

The answer to this question is not simple. Outcomes for children depend upon many factors. One thing we know for certain: the way parents manage the process is very important to children's adjustment. The better you do, the better your children do.

### Children's adjustment to divorce

When marriages come apart, most children are moderately to severely distressed. They may continue to experience confusion, sadness, or anger for months. Sometimes it can be longer. Research shows a great deal of variation in short-term reactions of children—even children in the same family. We know even less



about long-term effects of divorce on children. Again, there seem to be a lot of differences among children. Some do quite well while others suffer long-term harm. Most researchers agree that the first year or so after divorce is generally the most difficult for both parents and children.

### What makes the difference?

Three key factors appear essential to children's positive adjustment following divorce.

1. *The parents function effectively.* Parents who cope with the disruption of divorce can be more effective parents. They keep their day-to-day work and home lives going. They provide love, nurturance, consistent discipline, and a predictable routine.

2. *The parents do not engage in a great deal of conflict.* Following the divorce, even the simplest disagreement between parents can be upsetting to children. When parents are able to cooperate in childrearing after a divorce, children do better. We also know that children living in two-parent homes full of conflict do poorly.

3. *Children are able to maintain a positive relationship with both parents.* The idea of two involved parents is supported by child development theories. It is an ideal worth pursuing unless one parent has problems that endanger the well-being of the child.

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## Parenting apart

Parents who have divorced have had trouble getting along. Still, some parents are able to communicate and share parenting responsibilities quite well, even after their divorce. This is referred to as *cooperative parenting*.

This style of parenting after divorce is the ideal. While more and more divorced parents currently reflect this type of parenting, they are still the minority.

Here is an example of cooperative parenting. Sean and Kelly have been divorced for 1 year. They share physical custody of their two children: Jennifer, age 14, and John, age 10, as well as nearly all childrearing responsibilities. The children live with Sean for 2 weeks, then with Kelly for 2 weeks, and so on. The parents both live in the same school district.

Sean and Kelly talk with each other several times each week. They try to be consistent on things they consider most important: curfew, bedtime, homework, and participation in sports. The rules are generally the same at both houses. When something isn't going well, they can usually find a solution through compromise. Sean and Kelly are friends. Once in a while, they and their children get together for dinner.

If you and your former spouse find cooperation too difficult, it may be more realistic to adopt a style of childrearing called *parallel parenting*. Parallel parenting is characterized by low conflict with a modest amount of consultation. These parents

## Rules for shared custody

- Support each other in your roles as parents. Your children need both of you.
- Offer emotional support to your children as they move from one house to the other. Try not to display your own personal feelings of sadness and loss. This can provoke feelings of guilt and worry for the children.
- Refrain from using the children as messengers. It is a strain for children to be responsible for managing parents' communication.
- Avoid making negative comments about the other parent in the presence of the children.

remain very involved with their children. They communicate when necessary. But they conduct their parenting separately.

Here is an example of parallel parenting: Peggy and Mark have been divorced for 2 years. They live 500 miles apart, but share custody of their 2 children: Nicholas, age 8, and Michelle, age 4. The children live with Peggy during the school year. They live with Mark during the summer, and during winter and spring breaks.

Peggy and Mark's marriage was full of conflict. Their relationship after the divorce has been even more difficult. They have agreed to be respectful of each other. They never say negative things about each other to the children. While they have very different parenting styles, they trust one another to act in the children's best interests.

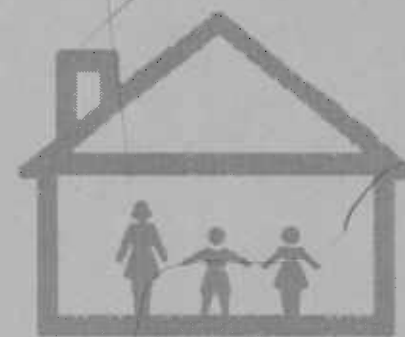
Peggy and Mark communicate with each other mostly by letter. However, the children communicate often with their father when they are not staying at his house. During the summers at his house, they call their mother weekly. For

the most part, things go smoothly. Certainly there is less conflict in the family than before the divorce.

## Suggestions for two-home parenting

Not all these ideas may be feasible for every parent. Try them out to the extent that you think they might work for you.

1. *Provide your children with a safe routine and a close relationship with you.* Children don't want to feel they are visitors in two households and don't really belong in either. Basic possessions such as personal space, a bed, clothes, toys, and family photos are essential to each home.



2. *Adhere to a schedule of living arrangements as much as possible.* Children need consistency so they do not doubt your trust and love. It is best if children are consulted when developing the schedule. Evaluate the schedule periodically and adapt to change.

3. *Avoid "weekend parenting."* You can schedule living arrangements for weeks at a time or from Thursday to Sunday. If possible, both parents should be responsible for *raising* the children. Weekend parenting is lopsided parenting; it doesn't involve the daily lives of the children. Try to make it possible for children to spend some time with both parents during holidays.

4. *Help children stay connected to both parents despite their living arrangements.* Letters, postcards, phone calls, and tape recorded messages are ways to maintain contact. Long-distance shared projects, such as a stamp collection, are a way to maintain the relationship when there is a long period of separation.

5. *Give the addresses of both parents to the children's school* so that newsletters and other school information are sent to both homes. Children can send school papers and artwork to the

parent with whom they're not living. This way, both parents can be involved in the children's accomplishments and can talk with them about school.

6. *Allow children to express feelings.* Moving from one house to the other is not always easy for children. Children may have intense feelings which they don't know how to manage. For example, your child may refuse to get ready to leave for the other parent's house. There could be many feelings underlying this behavior. Perhaps the child is angry, tired, or resentful about the disruption. Help your child briefly acknowledge his or her feelings and then get on with the task.

There may be some small ways you can help your child cope. For example, use the packing time as a time for talking together or stop for a treat on the way to the other home. Children must learn to accept reality and manage feelings to mature emotionally.

7. *Create rituals to help ease children's transitions between homes.* Think of an easy activity that could become a routine for you and your children before they change houses. A trip to the park? An ice cream cone on the way to the other house? A board game while waiting for the other parent to pick up? Try to keep this time as calm and unstressful as possible. Giving your children your undivided attention during this time will also be helpful.

You may believe your former spouse does not act in the best interest of the child. You may wish to retaliate or make it hard for the other parent.

Unfortunately, the child will suffer the consequences.

The best situation for a child is to have two parents who act in the child's best interest. Next best is having one parent act in the child's best interest. The worst is having two parents who are so angry with each other that neither can keep the child's interests in mind.

You may be concerned that your present custody arrangement is not good for your child, and you may not be able to work out a better situation with your former spouse. You may be able to work out the situation with outside help. In that case, contact an attorney or family counselor to discuss alternatives. It is helpful if both parents can seek help together. However, if the other parent will not go, you can benefit from discussion with a mediator or counselor yourself.

Shared custody has many benefits for children and parents. It takes hard work, personal sacrifice, and a great deal of maturity on the part of the parent. Without these elements, shared custody may not be in the child's best interests. Keep in mind what is most important for your children after divorce:

- Effective functioning of both parents
- Minimal (or no) conflict between parents
- A continuing relationship with both parents

With that in mind, we encourage you and your former spouse to cooperate, to the greatest extent possible, to create safe and loving homes for your children.



## For further reading

### ***Recommended reading for children of divorce***

(from *Family Information Services*, 1992)

*The Kids' Guide to Divorce*, by J. Brogan and U. Maiden (Fawcett, New York, 1986). (Pre-teens and teens)

*Dinosaur's Divorce*, by M. Brown (Little, Brown, New York, 1986). (Preschool and older)

*How to Live with a Single Parent*, by S. Gilbert (Lothrop, Lee & Shepherd, New York, 1982). (Young adults and parents)

*When Mom and Dad Divorce*, by S. Nickman (Julian Messner, New York, 1986). (Elementary school age)

## ***OSU Extension publications***

*Non-Traditional Families*, EC 1412, by Jan Hare and Lizbeth A. Gray (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1992). 75¢

*Communication Through Family Meetings*, EC 1436, by Leslie D. Hall and Joe Angelelli (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1994). 50¢

*Communication Strategies for Adult Couples*, FS 322, by Leslie D. Hall (Oregon State University, Corvallis, 1994). No charge.

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