

Co-parenting a disabled child

All relationships go through periods of change and challenge. Some parents find these experiences bring them closer together. Others may be overwhelmed by the experience and struggle to stay together. If things have broken down and you have decided to separate, we have some hints and tips to help you carry on caring for your child, whether you live with them or not. No longer living under the same roof as your children will affect the level of contact you have with them and it will usually be necessary to agree contact arrangements with your ex. Legally, a person with parental responsibility cannot be denied contact with their child without the intervention of the courts. Of course, it will usually be best if both parents can discuss and agree appropriate arrangements informally.

You'll need to work together with your ex to ensure you can provide the full support your child needs from both parents. Parental involvement is one of the most important factors in how disabled children integrate into school and social life [4] and non-resident parents play an important role in this [5]. As separated parents, working together makes you more effective at providing a responsive parenting role, and more likely to have a better relationship with your child [6]. This kind of collaboration between separated parents is known as co-parenting.

Communicating with your ex

For some parents, having to maintain contact with one another and sort out arrangements for the children can be a huge strain. If you're still upset with your ex-partner, you may be finding it difficult to communicate with them. However, it's important to try and set your disagreements aside long enough to get your living arrangements in order and make a collaborative parenting plan that means your child has a stable environment or environments where they can get the best possible support from both of you [3].

Here are some tips to help you communicate with your ex and protect your children from any fallout from the separation:

- avoid blaming yourself or your partner
- agree not to let your own relationship issues get into the discussion
- create some rules together about how best to manage meetings
- continue at another time if you feel discussions are becoming difficult
- don't communicate with your partner through your child, don't make your child a messenger.
- focus on child-related issues; it can help keep your dialogue clear and to the point
- work on a parenting plan together
- don't argue with your partner about the children in front of them. This will only increase their sense of guilt and blame about the break up.

Supporting your children

Helping your child through a period of separation or divorce is challenging as you come to terms with your own feelings. But there are things you can do that can help.

Keeping children informed about what is happening will help to prevent them blaming themselves and worrying unnecessarily. You can help children feel more secure by helping them to express their feelings, letting them know that you understand how they feel, and making sure they feel they can ask questions if they want to, will help.

Children often feel a great sense of loss and letting them grieve is an important part of helping them to deal with the situation and to move on to accept the changes in their family relationships. They may also express anger towards you, whilst this can be hurtful, try not to take it too personally as it can be a sign they are finding it hard to cope.

Not wanting to accept what is happening is also a common response. A child will have hopes and fantasies about the family, such as wanting you all to be reunited. Talking about these feelings, without raising false hopes, will help your child to move on.

Avoid criticising your ex-partner in front of the children. It can be very upsetting for them and leave them feeling like they are in the middle and forced to take sides.

Mothers and Fathers

Research has shown that mothers and fathers of disabled children can experience stress differently. Mothers' stress tends to be focused around the daily caring tasks [7], while fathers are more likely to worry about their emotional attachment with the child [8].

If you are the parent with the main caring duties, you may need to ask for some extra support from friends and family to help you stay on top of daily care. If you are the non-resident parent, you may want to schedule in regular phone calls between visits to help stay in touch and maintain the connection with your child.

Working together

As a co-parent, you still have a parenting role to do, even if you don't live with your child. While you may not be in a couple relationship anymore, you and your child's other parent will need to maintain a co-operative parenting relationship to give your child the maximum benefit of your care.

If you are the resident parent, part of your role will be to share information with your child's other parent and, assuming it is safe and meets any court requirements in place, ensure that they have access to your child.

While it can be hard to let your ex-partner into your routines, it's important to be open and welcoming for the sake of your child, particularly when there is important information to share about medical care and other additional needs [1].

Face-to-face visits are the best way to maintain good quality parent-child relationships but if you live a long way away from your child, frequent contact through emails, phone calls, or video calls can help make up for some of this distance [9].

Staying in touch with your ex can also help you plan for unexpected events, like your child leaving something they need at the other parent's home. You don't necessarily have to spend intensive time together, as long as you both commit to the agreed arrangements and stay in touch about important decisions.

If you are struggling to maintain a good relationship with your child's other parent, you can use the free parenting plan at [Splitting Up? Put Kids First](#) to keep on top of parenting arrangements without having to interact directly.

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