Perhaps you and your marriage partner experienced problems too difficult to overcome, and you chose to divorce. Getting a divorce through the legal system does not mean you break all ties with one another. You probably have to deal with each other on a number of issues, including matters concerning your children.
Why should divorced parents try to get along with each other?

It is often hard for divorced parents to separate the angry feelings they have toward one another from their duties as parents. However, one of the most helpful things you can do to help your children is to put away your anger and cooperate in parenting.

It is important for children to know they will continue to be loved. Divorce is almost always hard for children, but when both parents take time to support and love them, the children are less likely to have major problems from the divorce. When ex-spouses fight each other, the children often display behavior problems, have poor relationships with their friends, and have difficulty performing in school.

Divorced parents can cooperate in parenting whether one parent has full custody of the children or whether the parents have joint custody. As divorced parents, you do not have to agree on everything concerning your children. But you should not allow the children to be drawn into your disagreements.

As divorced parents, you will be better able to cooperate in parenting when:

- Both of you decide to do whatever is best for your children. This normally includes allowing the children contact with both parents. If child-support payments are part of the divorce agreement, they should be made in full, on time, and without argument.
- You respect one another’s right to share in parenting the children. The two of you may not like one another, but cooperation means recognizing that the children need a relationship with you both.
- You try to reach an agreement about some basic parenting rules. You don’t have to agree on everything, but you should be consistent in enforcing rules and joint decisions.
- You let go of angry feelings you may have for one another and work together to parent your children in a warm, loving manner.

It may be difficult for divorced parents to work together because one of the parents was abusive, because one parent now lives far away, because child support is not being paid, or because the ex-spouses are still angry with each other. It is not easy to deal with these difficulties.

What if there are serious problems?

If you think your ex-spouse is abusing the children, go immediately to the Division of Children and Family Services (DFCS). If your belief is accurate, the caseworker will take appropriate action to protect the children. Do not let your worry about abuse keep you angry. If abuse has occurred, make sure you and your child get professional counseling. When there has been abuse, decisions about a child’s future contact with the abusing parent should be made with the help of appropriate professionals.

Exception in cases where a danger has been recognized by a DFCS caseworker or other professional, it is important for children to stay in contact with both parents. If one parent lives in another town, that parent can send letters or emails, or make phone calls to the child. The child can send the parent school papers and drawings. The custodial parent should keep the other parent up to date on the child’s activities, interests, and health.

If the parent who lives away does not show interest in maintaining contact, then the custodial parent may want to seek support from others such as extended family and friends. These others can help the children feel that many people care about them. Children develop best when surrounded by people who love them.

When one parent remains angry after the divorce, there is no simple answer. Most divorced parents become less angry over time. However, there are a few who remain bitter and keep trying to pick fights. If this happens, the parent who is trying to get along should not fight back. Instead, it is best to keep conversations to a minimum, discuss how to help the children, and avoid areas of disagreement. It may be helpful to call a minister or a counselor to advise in dealing with an angry ex-spouse. No one really wins a fight between ex-spouses. And children are the big losers.
You can help your children adjust to the divorce.

Both parents have a role in helping children adjust to the divorce. They provide information and they help children understand their feelings about the changes in the family.

Children should be reassured that they are loved. It is best when each parent can share love with each child, but if this is not possible, children need to be told the truth. False hope makes the adjustment linger and creates distrust of both parents. It is all right to tell children that you know they miss their father/mother, but you do not know when they will see him/her again.

When visitation is a part of the plan, children need to be told when they will see the absent parent, and both parents should stick to the schedule. Consistency helps children feel safe. There are times that flexibility is crucial to developing and keeping good relationships between children and parents. And there are times when schedules conflict and flexibility is not possible. Each parent and child can keep a calendar which includes dates so that everyone has the same information.

Children may need more time, attention, and affection from you, or more privacy to think about how their lives are changing. Sometimes it is hard to tell exactly what children need and want. It is reassuring to them to know that you can listen, even if the child talks about the other parent.

Children need to keep their routine as consistent as possible. Plan physical activities, maintain hobbies, sports, and lessons, and provide opportunities to be with friends. Avoid changes, such as moving, changing schools, or changing babysitters. Work with the children’s teachers and others who are in close contact so that everyone can help the children learn to feel safe and to express feelings about the divorce.

Parents, be fair to each other. You may have very bad feelings for each other, but the children need to understand that they did not create these feelings. They did not cause the divorce. They cannot get the parents back together.

Young children tend to put parents on a pedestal and a divorce is difficult to understand. Parents can help children develop realistic expectations of the other parent by being honest with facts when answering questions. Competing for a child’s love, commitment, and attention by putting the other parent down, breaking promises, or buying gifts instead of giving of oneself can harm the child’s relationship with both parents.

Children grieve the loss of the absent parent and need encouragement to express their feelings. Accepting questions, tears, and other feelings of children will help them adjust to the divorce and establish a new routine. During the two years following the divorce (the critical period of adjustment), each parent should check progress on the following factors:

- talk with children to help them understand that they did not cause the divorce.
- plan and follow through with visits.
- avoid talking about the other parent in negative ways.
- give time for children to talk about feelings.
- do not involve children in adult arguments.
- children are informed of basic rules for each house.
- children are guided and disciplined in consistent ways.
- spend time with each child.
- discuss children’s feelings and behavior with other significant adults.
- tell children you love them.

You can help yourself adjust to the divorce.

Coping with divorce involves many changes: emotional, physical, mental, and social.

Feelings may include fear, sadness, anger, hurt, relief, loneliness, confusion, disbelief that the marriage is over, embarrassment, helplessness, depression, and self-blame. You may ask “Why?” over and over, and your self-esteem may suffer. You may have trouble sleeping and eating.

Regardless of which feelings you experience, most people benefit from talking with others. Friends and family members may be helpful. However, it is best to seek help through professional counselors and therapists. Divorce support groups are an ideal way to share with others with similar experiences, to get professional guidance, and to avoid wearing out friends as a sounding board. One thing that rarely helps is over-indulgence in eating, dating, talking, drugs or alcohol, or any other escape.
Some people think about suicide as a solution to their adjustment problems. Do not keep it a secret if you have suicidal feelings. Get help fast from a professional who is trained for individual counseling/therapy. Private practitioners, mental health centers, and some religious settings provide such services.

Changes in adjustment continue for a long time, but the most difficult time is usually the first two years after the divorce. The time and signs of adjustment vary from person to person. Avoid comparisons of yourself to the former partner or other divorcees. Their activities may not indicate how they really feel on the inside.

Getting the legal steps out of the way and the finances in order is a big step toward reducing some of the stress. It is hard to imagine that two parties may be more cooperative in divorce than they were in marriage, but cooperation helps both parties begin a new life. It may be helpful to see a financial counselor to discuss plans and alternatives for the future. This is especially true for parents with custody of the children and a lower-paying job or no job.

Social life may involve getting to know a different group. Be patient and attend activities where you can meet new people. Concentrate on family activities, take a class you always wanted to take, or share by babysitting with friends to that you can have some time for yourself.

There may be rough times when you see your former spouse or hear of her/his marriage, during holidays, when children visit the absent parent, or when you feel overloaded with full-time children in your custody. Absent parents may miss being with their children on a daily basis. You may also experience times when you feel that you have made no progress at all.

Changes may continue for a long time after separation and progress may come in very small “pieces.” Celebrate progress and continue to work on the unresolved issues – even if it means returning for counseling when you thought you had finished. Be sensitive to effects of the emotional stress on the body and mind.

Three things that help prevent or reduce stress are exercise, rest, and good nutrition. Everyone in the family will benefit if each of these areas can be a major focus of the adjustment period.

**What are the most important things to remember?**

Divorce adjustment is stressful for all family members. Children need both parents to care about them and help with their adjustment. It is normal to experience a wide range of emotions as well as the tangible problems such as finances, a move, or other changes. Divorce support groups, individual counseling, parenting classes, and reading are helpful. Remember, change takes time.

**If you want to learn more . . .**


**If your children want to learn more . . .**


