

raising your kids WITH your ex

Successful co-parenting relies on agreeing to disagree with your ex while always putting the best interests of your children first.

Here are seven ways to help you help yourself – and your children.

1 I will always love you

The ground rule for co-parenting is to ask yourself whether you love your children more than you hate your ex, says Nadia Thonnard, founder of The South African Divorce Support Association (SADSA). 'This is an effective way to evaluate whether you're focusing on what's best for your child.'

'When you get divorced, you need to move on with your life but you still need to put your children first – it's part of the responsibility of being a parent,' she adds. Emphasise the fact that even though you and their father don't love one another any more, it doesn't mean that either of you love *them* any less. Explain that your separation is in no way their fault, even if disagreements relate to them.

And if you try to ensure that your children feel secure and emotionally contained, they will be better able to adapt to new circumstances, says Jo'burg psychologist Dr Bernhardt. Let them know that they are allowed to be angry or sad or confused and that they're welcome to talk to you about it.

2 Hope less

Lindiwe Sithole*, who married at 21 and divorced at 30, says her ex-husband hardly ever pays attention to their daughter. 'He visits her when I ask him to come. I couldn't help being angry with him until Beverley Milun, who self-published *The Survival Guide to Parenthood* (from the perspective of a single mother) made a useful observation. She said, "Look at that couch. It's orange. Do you think if you stomp your foot, it'll turn red? No? Then understand your ex-husband is always going to be like he is and let it go."'

Thonnard points out that divorce usually means that two people don't agree on many things, *including* their approach to parenting.

'I used to feel disappointed when I asked my ex-husband to help me,' says Sarah Tempkin*, 36. 'Sometimes

he would deliver, other times he wouldn't. Now I just get on with it. There's much less frustration and quite a lot of self-congratulation!'

'Many women will relate to that sentiment', says Claire Penfold, Head of Divorce Mediation at FAMSA. But it's also not uncommon for fathers to rise to the parenting occasion when it is expected of them, says Dr Bernhardt. Nadine Olivier, 30, feels that her ex is more of a co-parent now than he ever was when they were together.

Still, no matter how involved Dad is, the load of parenting usually increases for mothers after a divorce. 'I find that the parenting role has mainly fallen to me,' says Sarah. 'Dad gets off a lot lighter with the admin and day-to-day running of the kids' lives. Being a full-time working mom doesn't make it any easier.'

3 Peace out

The best thing you can do for your children as a single parent is to reduce any conflict between you and your ex, says Penfold. 'Just because he's moved out doesn't mean it's now okay to be disrespectful. Choose your words carefully in front of the children. Try not to exacerbate any trauma.' Preserving the peace is also often the best way of being in a position to negotiate common parenting goals while you are parenting separately.

4 Law and order

'Joint rules are best for children,' says Penfold. 'Soon it'll become law for divorcing couples to mediate parenting plans, in order to establish common rules on issues like discipline when children are in the other home.' Children older than six can be included in a family meeting to negotiate rules, curfews and pocket money, she says.

'We've made similar rules in both houses,' says Sarah. 'Bedtimes are the same and neither of us allows them to watch TV during the week. We even

Dos & Don'ts

- Do set up rules of engagement. Are you going to communicate with your ex about the children via email, telephone or SMS (keeping in mind that tempers could flare)?
- Do accept that the parent living with the child is a soft place to fall for most kids. They may scream 'I hate you', but it's unlikely to be true. They know you're not going anywhere.
- Do give Dad the benefit of the doubt. He may not know how to help with the children's homework, but he can learn.
- Do listen to your children and encourage them to work through their emotions.
- Don't use your child as a messenger and don't interrogate them after they come back from the other parent. No 'Where did you go?' or 'Who was there?' says Penfold.
- Don't bad-mouth him. 'Children take criticism of their parents very personally,' she says. Most children know the truth about their parents. 'They don't want to hear you say it aloud, though.'
- Develop a new support group of other people in the same boat. Your old friends may unconsciously be taking sides.

have a joint star chart so if they ask for a star, I tell them I'll just call their daddy to check they were good there too.'

5 We are family?

Children want their parents to be together, says Dr Bernhardt. Nadine finds that this situation comes with a lot of guilt. 'I sometimes wonder if we should be doing more things together, like taking my daughter to the park, but I'm not ready to start doing things with my ex and I'm afraid that it might give her a false sense of hope that we might get together again.'

'If your children long for their father, make an arrangement for them to see him more often,' advises Dr Bernhardt.

6 Can't buy me love

'My ex completely indulges the boys when they're with him,' says Liezel Matthews*, 33. 'This makes things very difficult for me, as I can't afford to buy all the things that he does and I also don't want to buy their love. When I say no to something that they want, they say, "But Dad gives you money"'. How do you explain to a six-year-old and an eight-year-old that their maintenance is not for a new Playstation game?

'He used to try to control me with money and now I see him doing the same with the boys. I try to do things with them to show my love. I suppose I can only lead by example.'

Milun says you can either be 'controlled by this person by pennies and pounds' or make it yourself. She suggests that if you're uncomfortable with having less money than before or by his buying your children overly expensive presents, teach your kids that people are not defined by what they own. 'I tell my son that we need oxygen, water and food. The rest are nice extras, but one hurricane can take it all away.'

7 Only the lonely

Whatever spin you put on it, when your children's father moves out, a gap is left in your world. 'There is a loss of the relationship, no matter how bad the marriage was,' says Penfold. 'Though I don't regret our divorce,' says Sarah, 'I do feel lonely at times. I don't miss him, I miss the family unit and I sometimes feel wistful when I see a family of four sitting together. I used to feel very alone when the children were with him, but more recently, I've begun to enjoy that time. Rather than dwell on the fact that they're not with me, I start reading a new bestseller or see my friends. I've started to focus on me. It's a luxury few married moms have.' ❀

* Names have been changed.