

What is Co-Parent?

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All co-parents are not created equal.

By reason of court order, personal decision, distance, cost or conflict, some caregivers play a more active role in the day-to-day decision-making and nurturing of a child than others. In general, you should be able to place yourself and the other caregivers with whom you share child care responsibilities somewhere along a continuum from

- (a) Full-time, exclusive decision maker
- (b) Active and equal parenting partner
- (c) Secondary decision maker
- (d) Infrequent visitor
- (e) Uninvited, unwelcome and/or uninvolved parent

No matter where you stand on this continuum, three things are worth considering:

Is the total balance of caregivers successfully meeting my child(ren)'s needs?

The kids' needs must come first. Assuring that the kids' needs are met must be more important than considerations of getting what you need and far more important than whatever conflict might exist among the co-parents.

This point is critical, particular when separation and divorce occur. Co-parents who can agree to this one, simple principle are more likely to survive legal formalities with a minimum of stress, are more likely to go on to live emotionally healthy lives and are more likely to raise emotionally healthy children.

But putting the kids' needs first requires maturity. It requires the adult ability to see the world through another person's eyes, to genuinely grasp what the child(ren) needs, and sometimes to make decisions that go against one's own wishes.

The divorcing parent, for example, who recognizes her daughter's need for geographic stability might effectively sacrifice her wish to spend more time with her daughter in favor of the child's needs.

But what does a child need? Above and beyond food clothing and shelter, assuming safety and at least one warm and loving environment, kids need stability. They need predictability and consistency and limits.*

Kids need calm and firm and reliable. They need at least one home—a secure base—from which they can be launched each day and to which they can return to be refueled, confident and secure in every aspect of home.

Co-parents living apart may be able to meet these needs jointly (what courts sometimes call a joint or shared physical custody arrangement). Doing so requires that co-parents be role models of maturity. That communication and cooperation between the child(ren)'s homes is excellent, that co-parents genuinely respect one another and that a fair degree of consistency of expectations, limits and consequences between the homes can be established and maintained.

Unfortunately, the conflicts inherent in separation and divorce often contaminate the post-divorce co-parenting relationship. When separated co-parents lack respect, cannot communicate or cooperate or –worse still– are actively battling, the likelihood that joint or shared physical custody will serve the child's interests first and foremost diminishes quickly.

Am I offering the highest quality caregiving possible? Quality. Not quantity. One cannot make up for the other. Understandably, many caregivers who see their children infrequently want only to have a good time. Such a parent's motivation is understandable, but it's selfish.

“But I only see my son one weekend a month! Why shouldn't we live it up?” Two reasons: First, if “live it up” means no limits and no consequences, this isn't parenting, it's partying. Partying is fun. Everyone needs to, even parents and kids.

Parenting is about instilling security. It's about helping your children feel confident that they're being held. In the same way that an upset infant is calmed by being swaddled (that is, wrapped firmly in a blanket and held close), a parent's job remains to “hold” a child by setting limits and following through calmly.

The partying parent has the selfish goal of making the child (and him– or herself) happy.

The healthy, mature parent has the primary goal of making the child healthy, even at the cost of the child's apparent happiness. This means following through. This means that a misbehaving child may need to be grounded (or suffer some other consequence) even on dad's one weekend a month!

The other reason is this: The part-time co-parent who breaks all the rules becomes the good guy and implicitly sets up the other co-parent(s) to be the bad guy. When one caregiver does all the discipline and the other has all of the fun, the co-parenting relationship is unbalanced and the child will live in the resulting tension.

Is my caregiving role in the child(ren)'s life fulfilling to me? It's true: Your happiness in the co-parenting relationship is the least among these three considerations, but still important. Your wish to see your kids more often, to share in more of their fun, to attend the events in their lives and to be there as a role model and mentor is one measure of your love.

Many of us have children in the first place out of a selfish (if seldom voiced) wish to live again through their experiences or to pass on our wisdom (“Don’t do what I once did!”) for their benefit.

If the children’s needs are being met, yours may need to take a back seat. Making this sacrifice can be incredibly painful. Letting go of your kids represents a terrible loss to many parents, a real cause of depression and rage. Take these feelings to the adults in your life who can listen. Find a therapist who can help. But take comfort in your certainty that the kids’ needs are being met and give what you can when you can toward their growth and well-being.

----- **Parenting Pointer** -----

Co-parents living apart are sometimes able to improve communication, cooperation and therefore consistency for the kids by exchanging a parenting notebook. In general, a parenting notebook is as simple as a spiral bound notebook or as complicated as a structured form copied many times over and collected in a ring-binder. Structured categories help to minimize unnecessary exchanges and to keep the adults’ feelings about one another at a distance. Categories might include Health and Medication Updates, School and Homework Issues, Friends, Appointments and Successes.

If you use a parenting notebook, consider these rules:

1. The notebook is exchanged directly between adult hands. The kids do not have access.
2. The sending parent is responsible to briefly summarize any updates about each child in writing.
3. The receiving parent is responsible to “catch up” by reading through the notebook soon after the kids arrive and either to follow through or call to inquire further about any immediate concern.