



ADHD & DIVORCE

IF YOU'VE MADE the tough decision to separate from and/or divorce your partner, you know that, in terms of raising your kids, you are still deeply connected. Research has found that families living with ADHD deal with higher levels of conflict than other parents and that parents of children and adolescents diagnosed with ADHD are more likely to divorce.¹ Regardless of who in the family has ADHD, when people are stressed or tired, their weakest executive functioning skills are hit first and hardest. Divorce and post-divorce family life can be quite aggravating. In fact, according to the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, divorce is the second-most stressful life event following death of a spouse.² Ongoing parental conflict also contributes negatively to a child's well-being and increases their externalizing behaviors (acting out, anger, and oppositionality).³

Instead of living with these issues of anger, resentment, and frustration in your divorced family, how can you create a functional working relationship with your ex for the sake of your kids? Co-parenting, the ability to cooperate and work together after a divorce for the best interest of a child, is the path for nurturing a healthy adjustment and positive outcome for everybody in your family.

The co-parenting path

Co-parenting doesn't mean that you and your ex have to be great friends. But it does mean that overcoming your own negative feelings towards your ex and supporting each other in the process of parenting your offspring is your shared goal. You may have chosen not to be a couple but you will always be your child's parents regardless of the status of your marriage. You both love

**How to
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your kids and want them to mature into self-reliant, successful adults. Co-parenting occurs when both parents play an active role in a child's life so they can maintain close relationships with each one.⁴

Co-parenting focuses on *being a team*: sharing childcare, making and sticking to agreements about raising your children and refraining from undermining each other.⁵ For many divorced couples, putting aside hurt and anger about your ex and working toward compromises and agreements about the business of child-rearing can be daunting. For adults with ADHD who may struggle with impulsive reactivity, emotional sensitivity, and self-awareness, it can seem impossible.

Although you now live apart, you are still parenting your kids—*together*. You may disagree about bedtimes, chores, or routines: differing views about medication are a common sore spot for divorced families with ADHD.⁶ You may feel as if you've tried everything and you still can't agree on basic daily issues. But neurodiverse kids really need consistent messages, similar schedules, and clear expectations. When they are moving

from one household to another, this regularity becomes essential. Such arrangements rely on executive functioning skills like coordinated planning, organization, time management, and goal-directed persistence. Often in couples touched by ADHD, one partner may overfunction in these areas, resent the other person's challenges, and may have opted for divorce because of these exact issues. In living as divorced parents, these patterns may continue or be exacerbated.

Rather than trying to change your ex, recognize that you've split up because you could no longer meet each other's needs, accept your differences, and put your joint energy into creating effective ways to co-parent. You and your ex have to figure out how to value



what you each bring to the table as parents, put your child's welfare first, and deal with your feelings toward each other elsewhere. You don't have to agree on everything, but you do need to learn how to negotiate compromises that best serve your kids. Be *your best self* regardless of what your former partner does. When you separate co-parenting responsibilities from previous partnership difficulties and move beyond competition to collaboration, you create a team approach that benefits everybody.

Start with a communication plan

To set up an effective co-parenting arrangement, start with a plan for how you will communicate. If talking is difficult, agree to send fact-based emails about your child or teen with updates about what's happened at your house this week, issues with school or friends, or any concerns. Do not engage your child to deliver messages: being caught between their parents is particularly detrimental. Commit to some schedule of regular communication. If you are unable to have civil conversations or discuss delicate subjects without major arguments, seek counseling or mediation to find a neutral way to share information. Above all, avoid trash-talking or complaining about your ex to your children, which only promotes triangulation and unhealthy family dynamics.

If you can interact respectfully with your former partner, keep your interactions to business issues only. Decide in advance what each of you will do if things veer off the topic at hand (a common occurrence for folks with ADHD). If voices start to rise or nasty comments emerge, take a pre-planned break in the action. Pause, choose a new time to speak, and end your conversation. Rather fuel your rage with righteousness, use mindfulness and breathing exercises to calm down, remind yourself that you are engaging with this person for your child, and rely on self-compassion instead of self-criticism.

Secondly, make requests instead of demands. Use "*Would you . . . ?*" or "*Can we try . . . ?*" instead of "*I need you to . . . ?*" Adults, especially those with ADHD, rarely respond well to directives. The co-parenting approach invites your ex to join with you on addressing an issue rather than telling them what to do. Using reflective listening can help with this: say "*I heard you say X, did I get that right? Is there anything else?*" Many people argue because they don't feel heard, seen, or acknowledged. Using reflective listening will help avoid escalating conflict and maintain respectful boundaries and basic manners. You can always agree to disagree on the small stuff.

Thirdly, learn to compromise. A good compromise indicates that each person has given something up and nobody is completely happy with the result. Compromises are critical for successful co-parenting. Instead of going around in circles and trying to convince someone to see something your way, ask yourself these three questions:

1. What is in the best interest of stability for my child?
2. How can we meet in the middle or get to "yes"?
3. Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy?



It's tough for many adults (and kids) with ADHD to let go of something they fiercely believe in or think is the correct way to do things. Their natural tendency for black-and-white thinking and quick emotional outburst leads too often to "my way or the highway" positions and digging in their heels. Notice these patterns in yourself if you have them, and consciously make an effort to consider and listen to differing opinions in a situation.

Aim for consistency

Aim for consistency—steadiness—rather than perfection in your co-parenting approach. Steady household routines and steady parenting reduce anxiety for kids with ADHD because they learn what to expect. Being able to predict what's coming, more or less, helps them manage their emotions, organize their stuff, and plan for the transitions. Since shifting from one thing to another and demonstrating flexibility are tough for many kids with ADHD, they can make these adjustments more readily if there is a repetitive pattern along with helpful checklists, alarms, or alerts. Give them extra time to make adjustments as they move from one house to another and consider having a predictable meal or activity on those days.

Follow these additional tips for an effective co-parenting partnership.

1. Prioritize your child's needs.

Decide what social-emotional and/or executive functioning issues are the main priority for your son or daughter to improve based on information from the school, extracurricular activities, or medical situation. Identify your child's strengths



If one of you has difficulty with completing your tasks, what types of reminders would be useful but not nagging?

4. Rely on logical consequences.

We know that punishment is ineffective for kids with ADHD because it doesn't teach any skills. What do consequences look like in each house and for what offending actions? When there is similarity in how parents deal with issues and when the adults come together on big issues based on shared values and morals, children and teens respond with more cooperation. They cannot engage in "divide-and-conquer" tactics. Make a collaborative plan *as a family* for what you are going to do to manage misbehaviors, backtalk, aggression, lying, and so forth. Consider writing a contract that everybody signs so your child or teen sees that both of their parents are taking this seriously. 🗨️



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and challenges and address the weaknesses that you both agree on as a place to start. Pick something small to work on first that can span both households and outline how you're going to address this. Perhaps create a general daily routine which can be adapted to the needs of each household and share it via an online calendar or an app.

2. Create similar routines.

Things don't have to be identical at each household, but they need to resemble each other. It doesn't help your child to play "good cop" and "bad cop" with their parents. Similar schedules simplify life for children of divorce because they aren't moving between vastly different sets of expectations. Of course there will be some variation from home to home, but if the baselines resemble each other, it's much better for kids with ADHD. Perhaps your son has different sets of chores at each house but you agree he has chores. Maybe your daughter does her homework at different times but has comparable bedtimes. Of course, establish related guidelines about screen usage.

3. Maintain a unified treatment approach.

Many parents don't agree on medication, counseling, coaching, or tutors. What do you agree on? What type of interventions can you collaborate on that will best aid your child? While medication can be very useful for many children or teens with ADHD, behavioral interventions teach critical executive functioning skills. Divide up the tasks related to your desired treatments and schedule a time to follow up with each other.

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