

When People Parent Together: Let's Talk About Coparenting¹

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What IS "coparenting"?

Coparenting refers to how parents work together when they are raising a child. Do they agree on parenting strategies? Do they support each others' efforts in raising the child?

Coparenting can refer to how a married couple works together in parenting children, but it can also refer to divorced parents, people who have a child together but never married, or any two or more people who are working together to raise a child. For example, in some families, a single mom and her mother or parents are working together to raise a child. Every family system is different, but coparenting refers to how the people parenting a child work together.

Do children have an impact on the coparenting relationship?

Yes, children's personalities and behavior play an important role in how adults coparent them! Every child in a family has unique charms and presents unique challenges, and caregivers usually respond to each child a little differently. Research has found that the level of support or disagreement between coparents can be

influenced by the baby's temperament, even during the earliest months of a baby's life. Studies have also shown that babies as young as 3-4 months old already show behaviors, such as eye gaze patterns, that can influence how their parents respond to them and to each other.



Why is coparenting important?

In over a dozen studies, problems with coparenting during the infant, toddler, preschool, and elementary school years have been related to a wide variety of child problems, including problems with social adaptation, poorer preschool and school achievement, anxiety, and aggressiveness. Moreover, well-coordinated coparenting during the child's first year of life has been found to predict better

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child adjustment in later years, while distressed coparenting predicts later child problems.

The importance of developing a good coparenting alliance when children are still infants is doubly important when we take into consideration new research on brain development. Studies have found that the limbic system, the part of the brain that affects experience and regulation of emotions, undergoes its most dramatic growth and development during the baby's first year of life! Parents who find ways to work well together are more likely to succeed in helping babies learn predictable rhythms, regulate strong emotions, and reduce periods of prolonged distress. In these ways, cooperative coparenting relationships can play a significant role in supporting healthy infant and toddler development.

Is coparenting different from the marital relationship?

Absolutely! First of all, not all people who are married even have children, so the marital relationship is definitely different from the coparenting relationship. Second, the people who raise children together are not always married, and in many cases they are related in a very different way (e.g., a mom and an aunt, or a dad and his mother). This means that you can be in a coparenting relationship with someone even if that person isn't the child's biological parent. Finally, while having a good marital relationship is certainly desirable, it does not guarantee a good coparenting alliance. In fact, it is possible to have a wonderful marriage, but have difficulty doing an effective job of coparenting. The opposite is also true: some people who are divorced or who never married can do a wonderful job of coparenting their children.



Is coparenting the same as "parent involvement"?

No. The degree of involvement parents have in the lives of their children is certainly important. However, what is just as important, if not more important, is *how well* the coparents coordinate with one another. Here are some questions to ask yourself about your coparenting relationship:

- Do you and your child's other parent or caregiver work to communicate jointly agreed-upon rules and standards to the child?
- Does either of you badmouth, undermine and/or put down your child's other parent or caregivers?
- Are you and your child's other parent, whether you live together or apart, generally on the same page regarding your expectations, values, and goals for the child?
- Are you able to identify, talk about, and compromise on areas in which you differ? Or are you unable or unwilling to discuss your differences?
- When you cannot agree, do you each simply parent as you believe best, even if doing so provides an inconsistent, confusing, and/or disruptive environment for the child?

While issues of coordination and cooperation might seem to be most important when both parents are actively involved in children's day-to-day lives, cooperation and support are every bit as important in families where one parent is doing most of the active parenting. For example, in some families, life circumstances prevent one parent from being as involved as one or both parents would wish. However, if both parents make the effort to communicate, work together, and actively support one another's parenting, children will profit and reap the benefits.

Does good coparenting mean that parents must think or act exactly alike, or that they never disagree?

Of course not. All parents are different, and children delight in the differences in how different caregivers hold, stimulate, play with, soothe, and engage with them. Further, good coparenting does not require that parents always see eye-to-eye; conflict is a natural part of coparenting, and having differences in opinion is what promotes development. The important thing is how parents work together to negotiate and resolve their differences. Good coparenting requires that parents communicate regularly (daily whenever possible, and certainly at least weekly), about the ups and downs of parenting the child(ren). More importantly, it requires that each parent work hard to see the other's point of view, and to understand what their partner is trying to accomplish in rearing the child.

Most parenting behavior comes from a good place: parents love their children and want what is best for them. Often, though, parents value different sets of skills. For example, one parent may want the child to be a good rule-follower, to learn to conform, and to be aware of the rights of others. The other parent may want most dearly for the child to be a free spirit, a questioner, and an individual who leaves no stone unturned in their quest for the meaning and promise of life. Good coparenting often requires compromises between parents so that they can promote these different types of traits.

A strong coparenting alliance is most likely to develop if each parent finds a way to value what the other parent does well. In fact, combining the different strengths and gifts of each parent and collaborating will truly benefit the child.

What happens if there is not a good coparenting relationship?

If parents are not able to talk about their differences and concerns regarding parenting, or if they cannot come to a resolution about coparenting disagreements, then one of two things typically occurs:

1. Each parent simply continues to parent how they see fit, regardless of whether their rules and expectations violate what their partner is trying to do, or
2. One parent throws in the towel and withdraws from active coparenting, becoming more detached and/or leaving most of the decision-making, disciplining, and follow-through to the other parent.



In both of these circumstances, the child loses out. In the first case, the child is faced with inconsistent messages and active conflict, which can lead to feelings of uncertainty, instability, and worry—and often to behavior problems at home and school. In the second case, the child loses out on an important advocate and contributor. Every parent makes mistakes sometimes, which is why having a second adult at the ready is so important. Sometimes, if the family situation worsens, the second parent's

emotional withdrawal is just the first step in the parent's eventual departure from the household, depriving the child of the regular presence of a second parent altogether.

When is it important to start thinking about the coparenting relationship?

Although the coparenting relationship doesn't officially begin until the birth of a child, it is important to plan ahead. Research suggests that the way parents think about their future coparenting relationship *before* having children predicts their success in developing a strong coparenting alliance during the baby's early months. This influence can still be seen years later! There is also evidence that the way people coparent in the early years paves the way for how they will coparent over time. So, coparenting habits developed early on tend to last. This means that it is a good idea to try to do a good job with coparenting right from the start.



How do we know if coparenting disputes are something to worry about?

Although it is normal for parents and caregivers to have differences of opinion, you can assess the strengths and difficulties in your own coparenting relationship(s) by asking yourself questions, such as:

- Do I find myself unhappy with how the other parent is handling my child, but feel that I can't say anything to him or her about my feelings?
- Am I surprised by the strength of my reaction when I try to discuss differences in parenting with the other parent?

- Do I feel that I'm not always able to trust the other parent to handle our child in a way that allows me to feel comfortable?
- Do I feel that the other parent is watching my parenting far too closely?
- Do I feel unsupported or not trusted by the other parent in the way that I parent my child?
- Do I find myself saying things to my child, or to the other parent in front of my child, that put down this person's parenting and/or weaken his/her role as a respected parent in my child's eyes?
- When my child's other parent and I do try to discuss parenting differences, do we end up getting "stuck" and unable to come to a mutually satisfying conclusion?
- Do I have a hard time identifying things the other parent does that my child responds to really well, complimenting my partner on these things, and/or saying positive things to my child about the other parent even when he or she isn't around?

If you find yourself answering "yes" to many or most of the above questions, this may mean that the coparenting relationship is in need of a tune-up.

What can be done to improve the coparenting relationship?

Here are some things you can do to work on your coparenting relationship:

- **Communication:** Without question, communication is the key to building a solid coparenting alliance, just as it is the key to building a strong marital or couple relationship. Parents must make the time for communication and learn

how to effectively discuss their views about parenting.

- **Finding the positive:** Identification of, and respect for, each partner's contributions to the child's development is an important step towards an improved coparenting relationship. Parents should watch their partners' interactions with the children and attempt to identify not just the things they feel are damaging the child, but also the things that are benefiting the child. These may be things that you also do well, but often they will be things that are different from your way of doing things. The proof is in your child's response over time.
- **Compromise:** Parents need to be willing to give up the satisfaction that comes with "being right" all the time, and realize that, in many cases, both parents may hold reasonable views of how to parent the child. Parents should try to come to a conclusion that both can agree on. Indeed, research suggests that parents who are more flexible are able to coparent more effectively than those who are more rigid.
- **Never undermine or criticize the other parent's parenting:** It is easy to take verbal swipes at the other parent in front of the child, such as "Daddy's mad today," or "Mommy never lets you do anything, does she?" Or parents may actively undermine each other's parenting by "undoing" previously set limits or otherwise contradicting their partners. Behaviors such as these can reduce the child's respect for the other parent, cause conflict and/or alienation of the other parent, and create an inconsistent and potentially confusing environment for the child.
- **Cohesion:** Parents can work to foster unity in their family and to strengthen the partner's role as a coparent for the

child. Making an effort to include the other parent in your fun interactions with the child (though not when s/he is stealing his or her only moment of down time that day!) and regularly asking for the partner's opinion in parenting decisions will likely benefit the child.

- **It's not written in stone:** Remember that this is an ongoing process. Parenting plans should be revised over time as needed.



Sometimes, even when you try very hard to work with the other parent, it can be difficult to improve your coparenting relationship. If this is the case for you, it can be helpful to get an outside perspective. There are licensed mental health professionals who are experts in family relationships, and they can work with you to help you improve your coparenting relationship. To find a licensed mental health professional in your area, you can ask for referrals from your physician, child's school or pediatrician, clergy, your insurance company, or friends who have had a positive experience with a therapist, or check with the local licensing boards.

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