



Marriage Matters

Dealing Positively with Your Former Spouse

How parents work with each other after divorce has an impact on how well children will manage. Although maintaining a cooperative relationship with a former spouse can be challenging, particularly after one or both parents remarries, parents who work as a team will have well-adjusted children with fewer long-term problems. According to Dr. Constance Ahrons and Dr. Roy Rodgers, authors of *Divorced Families: Meeting the Challenge of Divorce and Remarriage*, five distinct types of relationships develop between former spouses:

“Perfect pals” have a common concern for their children’s welfare. They remain friends or become friends again after the divorce. They don’t allow hurts from the former marriage to interfere with their parenting. They help each other out in times of need, especially with the children. Unfortunately this kind of relationship is rare and often times short lasting.

“Cooperative colleagues” may not like each other very much but are able to get along for the sake of their children. They may have some conflicts but manage to keep them under control and not involve the children. They remain flexible with visitation and custody arrangements but with more tension than perfect pals.

“Angry associates” are still angry with each other over past circumstances and allow these feelings to affect their current relationship. They often argue and have difficulty with co-parenting. They are not willing to help each other in times of crises and stress, and the children are often stuck in the middle of their conflicts.

“Fiery foes” cannot get along and so cannot effectively co-parent. They primarily focus on the negative experiences of the marriage and divorce, and the children are often forced to side with one or the other parent.

“Dissolved duos” discontinue contact with each other and completely withdraw from their former lives.

The major difference between these five relationship types is how conflict and anger is managed. Conflict is normal in all relationships—what matters is how conflicted is dealt with. Although conflict is present in the first two relationship types, it is managed more effectively. Here are some things to consider when interacting with a former spouse:

- ♥ **Establish clear rules.** Clarify with each other what’s expected in your relationship and what feels comfortable when interacting. Some former spouses need a very clear set of rules with little negotiation, while others are able to negotiate changes over time.

- ♥ **Don’t try to change your ex.** Instead, focus on your behavior and the way you react to each another. Parents who try to control a former spouse’s thoughts, feelings, or behaviors end up frustrated, dissatisfied, and bitter when things don’t go their way.
- ♥ **Be respectful.** Treat your former spouse with respect, as you would a stranger. Respect his/her privacy and don’t expect to get the details of his/her life. Instead, focus discussions around the children unless the former spouse agrees to something different.
- ♥ **Keep agreements and appointments.** Be on time to pick up the children. If you promise to do something, do it. If you have difficulties honoring your commitments, let it be known and why.
- ♥ **Be flexible.** Work with each other on visitation schedules, holidays and vacations and remember that your children’s needs change as they get older.
- ♥ **Be polite.** Refrain from name-calling or bad language when referring to the former spouse, particularly in front of the children. Ask yourself if what you are doing is in the best interest of the children.

How former spouses interact can change over time. Respect your children’s need to love and develop positive relationships with both parents. Former spouses who promote good will in their relationships will be investing in their children’s happiness and success in life.

ACTIVITY

What type of relationship do you have with your former spouse? Think about the type of relationship with your former spouse that, although might be difficult for you, would be good for your kids. You cannot control the other person’s thoughts and actions, but you can control how you act and react. Explore ways you can improve your relationship with your former spouse. Talk with each other about ways you can be the best co-parents you can be. It may help to seek the support of a professional, such as a counselor, religious leader, or family life educator. For more resources to help your remarriage and stepfamily thrive, visit the National Stepfamily Resource Center at www.stepfamilies.info.



This resource supports the following principles of healthy relationships:



Care for self



Choose



Know



Care



Share



Manage



Connect



For more resources, visit www.gafamilies.org and www.nermen.org.