



How to Succeed at Co-Parenting in a Pandemic and Beyond

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Co-parenting can be a challenge even under the best of circumstances. Add a pandemic and this introduces a totally new set of issues — as many divorced couples have discovered over the course of the past year as divorce rates surged.

And while the pandemic looks like it's winding down, we are not yet out of the woods. A host of potential disagreements and conflicts remain. For example, one parent may be in favor of masks and the other not. Parents may not agree on whether kids should get vaccinated. If a child or a parent gets sick, where should they go? How should they quarantine? Should kids be able to see and hang out with friends? What happens if those friends are not vaccinated?

Even for divorced couples who have a friendly relationship, these questions can be tricky, especially since pandemic-related issues have become politically charged as well.

Here is a set of recommendations on how to negotiate the pandemic — and its aftermath — as a co-parent family:

SET GROUND RULES AND STICK TO THEM CONSISTENTLY

Each parent needs to be on the same page with what the rules are and enforce them consistently. Different rules between houses can be stressful for everyone and could result in kids displaying disruptive behavior. Talk about your plan for if someone gets sick before anyone is sick. Agree to a protocol and stick to it.

AGREE TO DISAGREE

If co-parents can't agree, agree to disagree civilly. While it is fine to express your feelings, getting emotional over issues that cannot be resolved only adds more stress to an already fraught situation. If necessary, allow a neutral, trusted third party to advise on a course of action, should there be a dispute between co-parents.

COMMUNICATE!

During a pandemic and its aftermath it's important to keep lines of communication open between co-parents and family members: respond to communications promptly and stay socially connected via phone, Facetime, Zoom and other video communications. If someone feels sick or has been exposed to someone who has symptoms, share that with your co-parent quickly.

BE FLEXIBLE AND MAKE THINGS EASIER

Pandemic protocols that disrupt daily routines can be stressful. Co-parents should work together to make things easier for all. For

example, one co-parent's work schedule might be better suited to accommodating a child's virtual learning needs or providing a quiet space for study. Flexibility and creativity in matters like scheduling and makeup visits lower stress levels for all. If necessary, agree on a temporary written contract that changes custody arrangements for the duration of the pandemic and consider make-up parenting time options.

RESOLVING SENSITIVE ISSUES: SOCIAL DISTANCING, MASKS, CROWDS, VACCINATIONS

During the pandemic, issues such as these have become emotional and politicized and differences of opinion may not be resolvable. Discuss these civilly with your co-parent and suggest using the recommendations of the CDC and other health authorities as a guideline — or get the opinion of your pediatrician. If necessary, get a family law professional or mediator involved. As a last resort, if there are serious safety concerns, seek an emergency order.

PLAN FOR EMERGENCIES

While most people who have gotten sick haven't been seriously affected, make sure everyone in the family knows what to do if they start feeling unwell. For children, this includes letting a responsible adult know as soon as possible.

IT'S ABOUT THE CHILDREN

All decisions made by co-parents during this time should focus on the personal and emotional needs of the kids, with their best interests in mind.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all had to adjust to uncomfortable changes as school, work, socializing and most aspects of our lives have been disrupted. Pressures on divorced families have been especially acute.

Co-parents should make peace with the fact that temporary changes to the parenting plan and custody arrangements are perfectly alright and often, the days will even out. Our best advice is that parents do not fall into the trap of keeping score. Your children will never know if they spent 180 nights with one parent and 185 with the other, but they will sense tension and fighting. Most of all, reassure your child that they are loved, the changes are temporary, and we will all get through this.

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