



Co-Parenting With A Difficult Ex

by Dr. Elizabeth Carr

Are you sharing custody of children with an ex who drives you crazy, or do you know someone who is? Most of us know someone struggling with this problem. Frequently, conflict doesn't end, just because the marriage has. When children are involved, combative couples find themselves tied to one another—when permanently separating would be easier.

Angry messages left on answering machines, passive-aggressive behaviors (such as chronic lateness for pick-ups, drop-offs, or support payments), and disagreements about parenting styles often get worse after divorce. Problems like these are typical and widespread.

Here are three simple strategies that, *when practiced regularly*, will increase your peace of mind, and help you deal more effectively with your ex:

1. Shift your attention to areas you have power over.

Peace of mind comes largely from focusing our thoughts and actions on the things we can control. In the serenity prayer, the writer asks, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." This is excellent advice for co-parents. The prayer goes on to state, "Taking (this world) as it is, not as I would have it." Imagine changing this to, "Accepting my ex as he (or she) is, and not as I would have him (or her) be." Obsessing about how you would prefer your ex-partner to behave won't make it so, and the time spent fretting over it may be making you more miserable than you realize.

2. Parent on your time. Work on recognizing and accepting that you are, in large part, limited to parenting during *your time* with your child (except in cases of legally recognized abuse or neglect). In most cases, you have very little control over your ex's day-to-day parenting decisions—such

as diet, bed times or even tone of voice and spanking. You may not approve of McDonald's dinners or your ex-spouse's discipline choices, and the late nights on weekends may throw off your routine when the kids return home.

However, unfortunately, your ex may have little motivation to do things your way. For most parents, time spent vexed over these matters leads more often to conflict and frustration than to change. Instead, focus on doing the best job you can during *your* time with your son or daughter. Consider the ways your parenting might buffer your child from negative experiences in the world (whether it's with your ex, a harsh teacher, or a troubled kid at school). For example, are you a good listener, a giver of balanced advice and a calm and loving parent?

The beauty of this strategy is that once you truly accept that you and your ex are *both* entitled to parent as you see fit, you will be more able to word future concerns as *requests* rather than as something that may come across as a *demand*, i.e., "You *should* be parenting this way (my way) because it is the *right* way." As we all know, demands such as these tend to go over like a lead balloon.

3. Let go of anger. Early 20th century theologian Henry Emerson Fosdick once said, "Hating people is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat." This quote is doubly true when it comes to co-parenting. It is impossible to stay angry with your ex without causing both yourself and your children to suffer. This doesn't mean you have to forgive and forget hurtful behaviors. The idea is to give these thoughts less "airtime." Think of the airtime you give your thoughts as precious (like commercial time at the Super Bowl); spend it wisely.

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