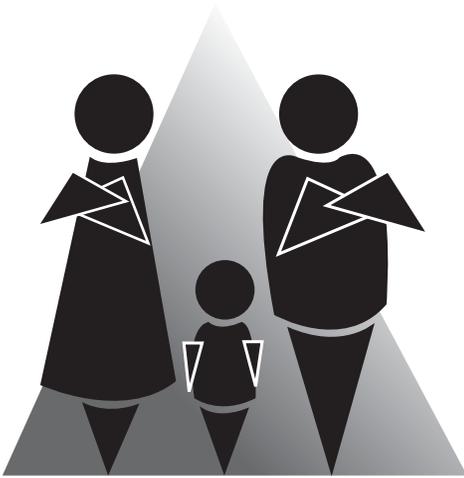


EXTENSION PROGRAMS

Agriculture and Forestry
 Community Leadership
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 Environmental Sciences
 Family and Consumer Sciences
 4-H Youth Development
 Natural Resources



Are Your Children in the
MIDDLE
 of Your Conflict or Divorce?

Shared Parenting After Divorce

How Do I Decide If I Want Shared Parenting?
 After divorce, the role of spouse ends, yet the role of parent continues. It may be helpful to stop and think about the following questions:
 How involved do I want to be in my child's life?
 Do I get along with my former spouse enough to be able to work through parenting issues?
 How do I manage parenting if my former spouse and I can't get along?

Example of Shared Parenting Form

Decisions About:	Who Makes the Decisions?	You & Your Ex-spouse Together
Food children will eat		
Clothing children will wear		
Where children will live		
Schools children will attend		
Contacts with teachers		
Toys and entertainment		
Children's grooming		
Friends of children		
Overnight visits with friends		
Dating		
Bedtimes		
Childcare/babysitting		
Television - which shows/ how much time		
Religion		
Morals, values		
Discipline		
Handling behavior problems		
Eating habits		
Diet, meals		
Allowances		
Health issues: Doctor visits, Dentist visits Medication		

What is Included in a Shared Parenting Arrangement?

The first step is deciding what aspects of parenting to share. This often depends on custody arrangements and being able to talk through issues with your former spouse without a lot of conflict. Think about these areas:

- How will decisions be made?
- How and when will you talk to your ex-spouse?
- How will schedules be arranged and shared?
- Who will arrange care giving when neither parent is available?
- How will discipline be handled?
- What will happen if an emergency occurs?

The following form is a guide to help you. Who will be responsible for making certain decisions? Will you make the decision? Will your former spouse? Will you make the decision together?





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Parents may be interested in shared parenting if they want an active role in their children's lives. The key to the success of shared parenting is related to how well parents function. What works best for some single parents may not work well for others.

Talk with other single parents for ideas. Then decide on the best parenting arrangement for you, your former spouse and your children. Shared parenting will not work if there is a history of addiction, family violence or other circumstance that would limit parents' functioning.

Studies show some of the benefits of sharing the parenting role are:

- Both parents and children can learn effective ways to communicate.
- Both parents recognize and respond to their children's needs.
- Children develop feelings of stability.
- Children continue relationships with both parents.

Keep in mind:

Problems may develop if parents send messages to each other through their children. Problems also arise when a parent talks badly about the other parent to, or in front of, the children. Children may feel guilty and unsure of their parent's love when they're caught in the middle.

If a parent asks about a former spouse, children may report that things are fine, even if they're not. Or, children may say things to make the parent feel guilty. Again, don't use your children by putting them in the middle. Parents often disagree on how to discipline their children. When mothers and fathers have different rules, children may not respect either set of limits. Or, they may use the differences to gain power over parents. For example, a mother may change a curfew when her daughter says, "Daddy lets me stay out until midnight." It's important to have clear rules and boundaries in your household. Try not to feel guilty if your rules are different from those of your ex-partner.

When it seems you and your former spouse can't agree on certain rules, it helps to restate common goals. For example, say "We both want to find a solution to this problem," "We're both concerned," or "We share the same goal," "Let's try to talk about this some more."

After you have discussed discipline and the responsibilities outlined on the form, it's important to set a date to look at adjusting the agreement. Changes in life may affect how responsibilities are handled. Usually a good time to review the shared parenting form is when a child starts a new grade in school.

Helping Children Adjust

Children can adjust to a variety of living patterns, including living in two homes. How well children adjust depends on whether parents can minimize their conflicts, stop arguing and fighting, and focus on their children's needs. When parents can't agree on things, it's important to tell children there will be separate rules in each home. It may be frustrating, but

it's important to remember that your children need you to be strong and to be a positive influence in their lives.

How To Help Children Adjust

Make a check next to the things you will try. I will....

- Focus on my children's healthy development.
- Accept my children's feelings.
- Avoid passing messages to my ex-partner through my children.
- Avoid making negative comments about my ex-partner in front of my children.
- Try to arrange my life so my children will continue to attend their school and play with their friends.
- Follow the shared parenting form.
- Jointly evaluate the shared parenting form with my ex-partner at least once every year and make needed changes.
- Avoid weekend parenting if possible. Both parents should be responsible for raising children, not just entertaining them.
- Try not to compete for my children's love and attention, for example by buying them toys or taking them on fancy vacations.
- Help my children remain connected to me, their other parent when they are with me, and with my relatives through letters and phone calls.
- Make sure school personnel notify both households.
- Try to provide consistency in setting rules. If this isn't possible, I will help my children understand that rules must be obeyed in each household, just as different rules are obeyed at day care or school and at home.
- Try to make the transition from one home to the other as easy as possible for my children. I will not show unhappiness or anger. I will talk to my children about their feelings if they want to talk.
- I will set up a ritual if this will help them make the transition. For example, we may stop for a snack on the way to the other household or go to the playground and talk a while.



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When Parents Disagree

What should I do when a former spouse manipulates, is over-controlling or won't let go?

When there is a lot of disagreement, it's time to re-think the child custody arrangement and the ways you communicate with your former spouse. Most single parents have disagreements. So, the best thing to do is to learn how to handle parenting differences.

Accept that there may be differences with parenting issues. Work on finding common ground only on the important issues. Mark five of the following suggestions you will try.

When a conflict occurs, remind your ex-partner you have a shared goal. For example, you both want the very best for your children, and you want your children to be happy and healthy.

Find a neutral adult to carry messages to your former partner.

Talk to a counselor, pastor or divorce mediator to help with ideas on how to build a workable parenting arrangement.

Discuss parenting issues when the children are not around. Talk over the phone if face-to-face conversations with your former spouse end in conflicts.

Follow the visitation schedule, but be flexible.

Avoid discussing important issues when transferring the children from one household to the other.

Keep conversations business-like by discussing the children. Don't introduce other issues.

Keep personal information to yourself.

Focus on what you can control rather than trying to change your ex-partner.

Avoid making unreasonable demands on your former partner.

Use reasons to explain your point of view if there is a difference in opinion about rules or discipline. For example, to improve the children's school performance, you want bedtime to be 8 p.m. rather than 9 p.m.

Consult an attorney if you think the current parenting arrangement may be harmful to the children. For example, if your former partner is drinking, using drugs or neglecting or abusing the children, talk to your lawyer.

Teach your children how to get help if you think they may be in a dangerous situation at some time. For example, your former partner may neglect them if he or she is drinking.

Know what community resources are available to help you become a warm, nurturing and responsible parent.

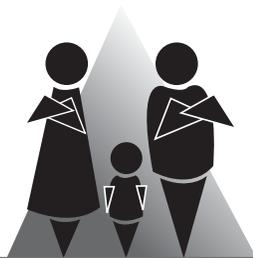
In every separation or divorce, parents need to recognize the importance of finishing what they started - raising their children. If it's possible, children benefit when they have relationships with both parents. Separation and divorce are difficult times for most children. Still, they tend to adjust to divorce smoothly when:

- They have a good relationship with both parents.
- Both parents respond to the needs of their children.
- Parents do not argue, especially when their children are present.

If you are interested in more information on this and other related topics, please call your local LSU AgCenter parish office. Below is the list of topics in the "Are Your Children in the Middle of Your Conflict or Divorce?" series.

A Child's View of Divorce
The Business of Co-parenting
Coping with Stress and Change
Costs of Raising Children
Custody Issues Today
Dating Issues
Disciplining Children
Friendship and Support
Help! I Feel Overwhelmed
Loss of a Relationship
Managing Income and Expenses
Not Enough Hours in the Day
Separating Your Finances
Sharing Parenting
Talking with Your Children
Talking with Your Children About Money
Talking with Your Children -- Communicating Within Your Family: Active Listening
Visitation Do's and Don'ts

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Shared Parenting After Divorce

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