



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Family Assistance



# Promoting positive coparenting relationships: Tips for fatherhood programs and fathers

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## Introduction

The term coparenting† refers to the mutual, joint efforts of adults who share responsibility for the children they are raising.<sup>1</sup> Coparenting is distinct from, but may be related to, aspects of adults' relationships that do not center around raising a child, including romantic, sexual, or emotional bonds.<sup>2</sup> Coparents may be married, cohabiting, separated, or divorced. They may also be foster parents, grandparents, extended family members, or other adults with responsibility for raising a child. They may live together in the same household, but in many cases they do not.

Developing and maintaining effective coparenting relationships among former spouses, new partners, and extended family members is not an easy task. Coordination can be even more complicated for unmarried men with children from multiple partners where the coparenting team might include several former partners, a current partner, and family members and friends related to current and former relationships.<sup>3</sup> However, promoting positive, stable, and supportive coparenting relationships is important for the well-being of children and their families across coparent and family types.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Effective communication and shared decision-making among coparents is associated with greater academic achievement and social skills for their children,<sup>7</sup> while coparenting conflict is associated with poorer academic and social skills and problem behaviors such as aggression or hyperactivity.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, supportive coparenting can help counteract the negative effects of parental separation or divorce on a child's well-being,<sup>9</sup> but children who are exposed to coparenting relationships characterized by conflict and a lack of cooperation may feel depressed, anxious, or abandoned.<sup>10</sup>

Fathers and mothers who have unhealthy coparenting relationships may also experience more depressive symptoms and more parenting stress,<sup>11</sup> while those with higher levels of supportive coparenting tend to experience less parenting stress and greater parental efficacy.<sup>12</sup> Coparenting quality is also important for strengthening fathers' relationships with their children, as it is associated with greater father involvement.<sup>13,14</sup>

This brief summarizes relevant research on coparenting; offers strategies to help practitioners encourage and support high-quality, stable, coparenting relationships; and provides tips for fathers. We focus particularly on tips for fathers who live separately from the mothers of their children.

*"Co-parenting during and after divorce is a different skill than co-parenting while being married ... it takes practice to become a good co-parent ... it may not be easy to work with a former spouse or partner, especially right after divorce or a break-up."*

**Jessica Troilo**  
Making Co-Parenting Work

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† "Coparenting" can be written with or without a hyphen. We use the hyphenless format in this brief, but we keep the hyphen when citing a published work that uses that format.

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## What shapes the quality of coparenting relationships?

### Current romantic relationships

Overall, research shows that parents who are currently romantically involved with each other, especially in a married or cohabitating relationship, tend to report higher quality coparenting relationships than those who are not romantically involved.<sup>15,16</sup>

### The “Front-end” versus “back-end” nature of relationships

“Back-end” coparenting relationships, where coparents had a meaningful romantic connection over a number of years prior to separation, are likely to be more intense and contentious, at least immediately following a break-up, than “front-end” relationships between coparents who never lived together and did not have a lasting or developed romantic connection.<sup>17,18</sup>

### Presence of a new romantic partner with one or both biological parents

Research has shown that the presence of a new romantic partner tends to strain coparenting relationships between previous partners, especially if new children are involved.<sup>19</sup> However, some evidence indicates that other factors, such as the level of father involvement and a father’s access to his child, more strongly explain coparenting quality after a relationship dissolves.<sup>20</sup>

### Father involvement

Many studies have found that greater father involvement (measured as frequency of contact with the child,<sup>21</sup> quality of father-child interaction,<sup>22</sup> and provision of financial and material support<sup>23</sup>) is associated with better coparenting relationships. It is difficult to know whether father involvement predicts coparenting or vice versa, but some studies examining this association over time suggest high-quality coparenting may be a better predictor of greater father involvement than the reverse.<sup>24,25</sup>

### Economic support

Fathers’ provision of economic support is associated with higher-quality coparenting relationships, perhaps because mothers are more likely to feel the father is contributing to childrearing when he helps support the child financially.<sup>26</sup>

### Employment status

Fathers’ employment status is generally linked to higher-quality coparenting relationships, perhaps because employment affects fathers’ ability to contribute financially.<sup>27</sup>

### Developmental needs or special needs

Raising a child with developmental delays or other special needs adds increased challenges to a coparenting relationship. Parenting stress levels are high among parents whose children have developmental disabilities, especially those with children on the autism spectrum.<sup>28,29</sup>

## How does the quality of coparenting relationships affect children?

In general, whether or not their parents live together, children tend to do best when their coparents:

- Understand each other’s parenting style.
- Communicate effectively and openly about differences in parenting styles.
- Manage any disagreements in respectful ways.
- Trust one another’s abilities as parents.
- Establish clear rules and standards for the children.
- Maintain a “common front” so that children do not get conflicting messages or learn to play parents against each other.<sup>30,31</sup>



Coparents who do not live together need to be sensitive to, and aware of, their children's feelings, particularly when parental separations have been recent or contentious. Their children may feel sad, angry, guilty, lonely, and/or abandoned and may blame one or both parents. Children in these situations are likely to do best when their coparents:

- Look at things from a child-focused approach.
- Make them feel loved and wanted in each home.
- Have a way to relate to one another that keeps the children out of any disagreements and bad feelings.
- Learn to manage their major disputes with one another.
- Support each other's relationship with their children.
- Allow the children independent relationships with each of them.<sup>32,33</sup>

***Four Essential Features of an effectively functioning coparenting alliance that supports children's emotional health***

1. *Support and solidarity between parenting figures.*
2. *Consistency and predictability in the approaches the different caregivers take in guiding the child's development.*
3. *Security and integrity of the family's home base (regardless of whether that home base is a single domicile or spans multiple residences).*
4. *Accurate attunement to the young child's fears, needs, wishes, and sensibilities.*

**James McHale and Karina Irace**  
Coparenting in Diverse Family Systems

## The role of fatherhood programs

Given that coparenting relationships play such an important role in child and family outcomes, fatherhood programs are uniquely positioned to help fathers strengthen their coparenting relationships and improve the well-being of their children. However, this is not easy work, particularly if program staff only have contact with the father. Ideally, a program can work with both parents, as well as other coparenting team members, but that is not always possible. Broadly, fatherhood programs can consider:

- Providing prenatal education that includes a focus on the importance of coparenting for expectant fathers.
- Working with new fathers during their children's early years to build key parenting and relationship skills.
- Working with fathers at all stages to break unhealthy coparenting patterns and build positive relationship skills.
- Involving fathers and their coparents in services designed to strengthen their relationship and coparenting skills.
- Helping non-residential fathers engage with the mothers of their children in positive ways.

Including a focus on the quality of coparenting relationships during initial conversations, formal intake, and assessment procedures is a good way to learn about a father's situation and concerns. For instance, if he is living with his coparent and children, the program could invite the parents to participate together in group or individual skill-building sessions; if he is not living with his coparent, the program may be able to reach out to the coparent and talk with them; if the coparent is not available or willing to participate, the program could work on skill-building with the father and offer other support and referrals as needed.

## Working with fathers and their coparents

Research has shown significant impacts (e.g., increased father involvement, lower parenting stress, and stability in couple relationship satisfaction) when fathers participate in parenting and relationship workshops with a coparent.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, research indicates improvements in communication, collaboration and problem-solving between unmarried parents when they participate together in dyadic (mother-father) coparenting sessions during pregnancy.<sup>35 36 37</sup>

It is easier to involve mothers in coparenting services when they are currently romantically involved with the father, but some programs are able to work with separated or divorced parents in group settings. In these cases, fathers may need assistance from program staff to convince the mother to attend. In outreach to mothers, be respectful and willing to hear the mother's side of the story; emphasize that the program is acting as a neutral party and not an advocate for the father; stress how the program is designed to help the father improve his situation (e.g., employment, housing, parenting skills, general competency); and,

importantly, explain how improved communication and collaboration between coparents can be beneficial for children. Some programs have had success in reaching out to mothers through female staff, who are less likely to be seen as advocates for the father, or working with partner agencies who might contact mothers as a neutral party.

When mothers cannot take part in fatherhood program services and activities (e.g., if fatherhood programs cannot or do not offer services to mothers or coparents, if there is too much conflict between coparents, or if the mother's schedule does not allow her to attend), consider the possibility of partnering with organizations that mothers might trust or be involved with (e.g., a maternal health, Head Start, or home visiting program) and encouraging those organization to provide information on coparenting skills.

If the coparent does not have a relationship with a potential partner organization, consider referring fathers and their coparents to a trained mediator or call the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse's National Call Center at 1-877-4DAD-411 (1-877-432-3411) to facilitate mediation between the coparents.

#### ***Coparenting group sessions for coparents***

*Sessions should provide an environment in which participants can explore their feelings, ideas, goals, and ways of relating to each other based on their own culture and values. Potential topics include:*

- *Self-analysis/self-reflection (e.g., vulnerabilities, personal goals for change, recognizing and coping with depression, strengthening self-esteem).*
- *Understanding the importance of mothers' and fathers' involvement for their children's development and well-being.*
- *Reviewing and enhancing parenting skills, communication styles, and problem-solving skills.*
- *Discussing typical differences in parenting styles of mothers and fathers.*
- *Identifying parenting styles that participants may have learned from their own parents.*
- *Recognizing and understanding external stressors that may shape the coparenting relationship (e.g., making a family budget, satisfaction and stress of being an economic provider, fathers' rights and responsibilities regarding child support, dealing with community agencies, level of support from family or friends).*
- *Building and strengthening support networks.*

**Carolyn Cowan, Philip Cowan, Kyle Pruett and Marsha Pruett**  
The Supporting Father Involvement Program

## Working directly with non-residential fathers

If programs working with non-residential fathers are not able to include coparents in program activities or services, it is still possible to build fathers' coparenting awareness and skills. Programs can use individual case management and group work to talk with fathers about their coparenting relationships. Priorities should include emphasizing the importance of effective coparenting for their children's well-being, learning more about their individual circumstances, helping them develop key relationship skills (e.g., effective communication, active listening, empathy), and offering tips to minimize the effects on children of any tension, stress, or conflict.



**Common issues faced by non-residential fathers**

- Contact with their children.
  - Frustration that they are not more involved in their children's lives.
  - Lack of awareness of the importance of legally establishing paternity if they are unmarried.
  - Desire for more time with their children (access and visitation or custody issues).
  - Anger and resentment toward their children's mother concerning time with children.
  - Frustration with court or child support systems because they perceive, rightly or wrongly, that individuals and agencies are biased against them in terms of parenting time.
- Complicated relationships and multiple family or household responsibilities, which present challenges to meeting the needs of their children.
- Lack of knowledge about how to navigate child support and court systems.
- Child support obligations that they struggle to meet.
- Barriers to steady employment, such as inconsistent work history, lack of affordable housing, criminal history, substance abuse issues, lack of educational qualifications, or appropriate job skills.

**National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse**

Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field

Non-residential fathers may express anger or frustration with the mothers of their children or public systems such as courts, child support, or child welfare that may be affecting their ability to spend time with their children. Practitioners should create a safe space for fathers to express these feelings, but be careful not to condone any anger toward the mother; rather, they can help dads focus on what is best for their children. Although fathers may have valid reasons for their frustration, they need to recognize that they are more likely to be able to spend time with their children if they learn to self-regulate their emotions and behavior and talk respectfully to their coparent and public officials.

Non-residential fathers may also need program assistance to understand and navigate legal and other systems. There may be cases where the mother is preventing a father from seeing his children or threatening to do so.<sup>38</sup> He may be concerned that his inability to pay his child support will impact his visitation rights; if he has not established paternity, he may not understand how this limits his legal rights.

It is important to recognize that, in some cases, the mother may be justifiably skeptical based on past behavior or previous promises from the father that he has changed. In these cases, first help the father understand and acknowledge the consequences of previous behavior. Emphasize that he needs to show the mother that he is serious about improving his coparenting skills, while also recognizing this will take time. If he develops his parenting and communication skills and shows that he is meeting other goals to improve his situation, he will improve the chances of building and maintaining a successful coparenting relationship. One thing we have heard from fathers is that as they improve their communication and coparenting skills, the mother's attitude towards them begins to change and her skills also begin to improve.<sup>39</sup>

As fathers and their coparents improve their communication skills, it will be easier to work together to develop a parenting plan. A parenting plan is a guide to help coparents and other coparent team members establish mutual understanding and address common coparenting problems, such as agreeing to standard rules across households, developing a visitation schedule, and setting expectations for communication. This can minimize coparenting conflict by setting clear expectations and shared understanding of what each coparent wants and expects.

*"It is important to recognize that mothers are often as hurt, disappointed, angry, and frustrated about their coparenting situation as fathers. Coparenting services will not be effective as long as either parent has issues that have not been addressed. Therefore, programs should try to offer mothers the same kind of wrap-around services as they offer dads."*

**Harold Howard**

Community Care Director, Talbert House, Cincinnati, Ohio

**Individual and group sessions for non-residential fathers**

Provide a safe space for fathers to discuss their feelings and focus on ways to relate to their coparents.

Topics might include:

- Concerns and frustrations related to coparenting.
- Reflection on childhood and relationship experiences, ways in which those experiences may shape their current parenting and relationship skills.
- Developing empathy for the experience of their children and focusing on their well-being and security.
- Identifying areas in which they share common desires with their coparents for protecting their children and helping them adjust successfully.
- Practicing problem-solving strategies. For example, examine an area of coparenting difficulty (e.g., agreeing on pick-up and drop-off times), discuss what is difficult and any points of disagreement, then come up with solutions to make those difficulties go more smoothly.
- Enhancing communication and relationship skills.

**National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse**

Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field

**Some basic elements of a parenting plan**

- Determine when the children will spend time with each parent on a normal basis.
- List important vacation and holiday times (including school breaks and birthdays) and decide how to split that time.
- Determine how you will make temporary and permanent changes to the parenting plan.
- Determine who will make day-to-day decisions, and how you will discuss and make important decisions together.
- Arrange for the financial and medical support of the children (e.g., how you will split costs of things like school supplies, hobbies, extracurricular activities, and doctor visits or medications).
- Determine how the parents will exchange the children as they move between their two residences (e.g., pick-up or drop-off times, involvement of other coparenting team members).
- Decide what to do if either parent moves to a new residence that is in a different town or state.
- Decide how you will resolve a future conflict to avoid going to court (e.g. mediation, counseling).

**The Office of the Attorney General of Texas**

Parenting Together, Living Apart

## When coparenting may not be appropriate

There may be situations where coparenting is not an appropriate or safe option. For example, there may have been reports of domestic violence or one coparent may have raised concerns about a child's safety in the other household. In these situations, the fatherhood program should not push for a coparenting relationship, and could provide a list of resources for alternative services (e.g., substance abuse treatment, domestic violence shelter, mental health counseling).

There are some instances where parents might both be involved in their child's life even when coparenting is not appropriate or possible. This is referred to as parallel parenting and may be appropriate if there are concerns about each adult's ability to have a positive coparenting relationship, but not in their ability to be parents to the child.<sup>40</sup>

## Coparenting tips for non-residential fathers

These tips are drawn from various resources, all of which are included in the helpful resources section of this brief. Practitioners can share these tips with fathers verbally or as a handout to accompany group or individual discussions.

### Did you know?

Children do better when their coparents:

- Let go of angry feelings and resentments towards each other.
- Find a way to forgive and work together in the best interests of their children.
- Look at things from a child-focused approach.
- Make sure their children feel loved and wanted in each home.
- Have a way to relate to one another that keeps the children out of any disagreements and bad feelings.
- Learn to manage their major disputes with one another.
- Support each other's relationship with their children.
- Allow the children to have independent relationships with each of them.

### What you can do

- **Focus on your children.** Make their feelings and your relationship with them your top priority.
- **Be honest** about your feelings and tell the truth, but be careful not to burden your children with your emotions.
- **Stay calm.** Children need to be excluded from their parents' stress and drama as much as possible.
- **Be aware** of your own behavior. Children learn from their parent's actions.
- **Communicate without being confrontational.** Focus on your child, not on conflicts or disagreements with the other parent.
- **Listen to** the other parent. Try to understand their point of view. Listen without being defensive. Try to avoid arguing.
- **Share your experience.** Point out concerns you have in common, and ask for help and advice (e.g., "We're both concerned about Sally's grades. What can we do to help her with her homework?").
- **Compromise.** Research suggests that parents who are more flexible and willing to compromise are able to coparent more effectively than those who are more rigid. The "winner" of any compromise should be the children rather than any of the adults.
- **Give compliments.** Problems often arise when people feel unappreciated. Make a habit of thanking your coparent for what they do for your child.
- **Be consistent.** Try to maintain somewhat similar rules, boundaries, and schedules across households. This is particularly important during the first few years after a divorce or separation. The more consistent the two households are, the more stable and less anxious children will feel.
- **Be respectful, considerate, and flexible.** Take the opinions of others seriously.



### What to avoid

- Do not bad mouth the other parent, particularly when your children might overhear you.
- Do not ask your children about the other parent's life or circumstances.
- Do not ask children to keep secrets about you from the other parent.
- Never undermine or criticize the other coparent's parenting.

*“The main reason to work at co-parenting is that it helps children deal with all the changes that happen when their parents are no longer together. Even though you may not want to talk to the other parent after the romantic relationship ends, you still have a very important relationship, and it’s the most important one of all: a parenting relationship.”*

**The Office of the Attorney General of Texas**  
Parenting Together, Living Apart

## Helpful Resources

### Judicial Council of California

- [Families change: Parent guide to separation and divorce](#) – Online resources and tips for parents and children experiencing divorce or separation.

### Child Find of America

- The Parent Help program provides mediation services for the NRFC hotline plus other coparenting resources, including:
  - [Parenting apart: Communication skills](#)
  - [A child’s fundamental rights: A document for parents living apart](#)

### Mediate.com

- [Co-parenting](#) – An article that helps fathers and practitioners understand how divorce can affect a parent-child relationship and the coparenting relationship.

### Michigan State University

- [Together we can](#) – A curriculum designed to improve coparenting relationships of unmarried parents.

### National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

- [Encouraging effective coparenting in blended families](#) – Information for practitioners working with blended families and stepfamilies.

### National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

- [What does healthy coparenting look like?](#) – Tips and hints from the DadTalk Blog.
- National Call Center – A toll-free number (1-877-4DAD-411/1-877-432-3411) where fathers and mothers can receive information and referrals for mediation assistance or other fatherhood issues.
- Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field
  - [Working with fathers to enhance relationship skills](#) – This toolkit section includes information on types and complexity of relationships, and what fatherhood programs can do.
  - [Journey – the road you’ve traveled](#) – A guided meditation activity can be used to help fathers reflect on the influence of their experiences growing up.
  - [Your child’s perspective: The IALAC \(I am loveable and capable\) story](#) – A short activity designed to demonstrate the effect of parental conflict on children and increase participants’ motivation to work cooperatively with their coparent and other parenting team members.
- [The importance of coparenting and relationship skills: Helping fathers help their children](#) – Webinar (July 31, 2019).

### National Stepfamily Resource Center

- [Smart steps](#) – A six-session curriculum designed for remarried or partnering couples and their children, with a focus on building couple and family strengths and addressing the unique needs and issues that couples face in stepfamilies.
- [Healthy communication in stepfamilies](#) – This publication gives tips for stronger communication.

### Office of the Attorney General of Texas, Division for Families and Children

- [Parenting together, living apart](#) – An online coparenting guide and video.

### The Supporting Father Involvement Program (SFI)

- The [SFI website](#) provides information on the SFI program and other relevant publications.

### University of South Florida St. Petersburg, Family Study Center

- [When people parent together: Let's talk about coparenting](#) – A research overview with tips for parents.
- [Coparenting in diverse family systems](#) - A research overview by James McHale and Karina Irace, published in McHale & K. Lindahl (Eds.). *Coparenting: A conceptual and clinical examination of family systems.* (pp.15-37). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

### U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health

- [Co-parenting: resources and best practices for service providers](#) – A publication with tips for programs working with young parents.

### West Virginia University Extension Service, Families and Health Programs

- [Making co-parenting work](#) – This guide by Jessica Troilo provides ten tips for making coparenting work.

## Books for parents

- Ashley, S. (2001). *Fathers are forever: A co-parenting guide for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* Divorced Fathers Network: Scotts Valley, CA.
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