FAMILIES NEED FATHERS®

because both parents matter

What is Shared Parenting and Why is it Best?

Shared parenting is where children have the full involvement of both parents. Research shows this best meets their needs.

Shared parenting, also known as 'joint parenting', are terms used for arrangements that ensure that children experience he full involvement in their lives of their separated parents with neither dominating. There is plenty of research that demonstrates that children's wellbeing is best met in shared parenting arrangements and they grow up to be healthier adults.

Shared parenting is what your children want given a fair choice. They want both their parents to love them, protect them and be firm and fair. They want to see both their parents cooperate, have the same rules and not to argue or disrespect each other. Are you up to it? Your likelihood of an effective shared care arrangement of your children will depend on your ability to convince your ex it is a good idea and that it can work for them.

What prevents shared parenting?

Often it is a combination of obstruction of the other parent (most commonly mothers by virtue of having day-to-day care and control over children after separation), reluctance or inability by one parent e.g. because they live far away, don't have appropriate housing, etc (more likely to be fathers). Social workers, CAFCASS and judges who make the decision are also often reluctant to agree to shared or joint care proposals. Even when social workers recommend shared care, judges may well decide the child will live with the mother.
In 2014, the then President of the Family Division (top family judge for England and Wales), Sir James Munby acknowledged that professionals and judges don't always keep up with changes in society, saying ***"…a child's welfare is to be judged by the standards of reasonable men and women in 2014, not by the standards of their parents in 1970, let alone by the legislators of 1925."***

The best shared care arrangements are negotiated between two reasonable parents who put the future of their children first and not petty grudges about their past relationship. If you can negotiate a shared care arrangement without going to court, do so.
Once the court have decided a child "will live with the mother (usually) and be made available to the father…" a whole range of child benefits are restricted largely to mum only. These include housing benefit, child benefit, tax credits, calling the shots on contact arrangements and discipline issues. Some things that should be a right, or are a right on paper because you are a father with legal Parental Responsibility, often become difficult. These include medical

information and any kind of arrangement with the children's doctor, school appointments, communications with the school, discussions and help from social workers communications from hospitals, religious matters, name change and moving away or changing school.

How can I convince my ex that shared care is in our child's and their best interests?

This requires a different frame of mind from the one you are likely to have if you have just extracted yourself from an acrimonious relationship with your ex.

The best way to describe your approach to your ex is one of "rational detachment". The same professional approach a doctor will develop to cope with upsetting medical conditions or a psychiatrist to a seriously traumatised client. This approach is the most effective way to help their patients.

Your job is to help your ex understand the advantage of having a cooperative and supportive other parent that they trust to assist with the raising of your children. You will do this by not rising to the bait, ignoring the button pressing, being reliable friendly and supportive. A hard call but if you concentrate on one thing at a time it can be done.

What if I don't want to or can't be a day-to-day care?

We understand that there are parents, mostly dads, who prefer to leave mums to provide day-to-day care, perhaps whilst they go to work or, less often, because they prioritise other activities in their lives. This may be because they or their partners have never wished to or had the opportunity to be main carers. It could also be for economic reasons e.g. because they had a much better job. Such attitudes are changing amongst younger people in particular, though dads are also less well supported by government policies in the UK e.g. statutory paternity leave is only two weeks at a very low level of pay, whereas statutory maternity leave is 52 weeks (something we have been campaigning to be addressed).
However, if you can arrange your life in a way that enables you to prioritise having your children on a joint basis with your ex – they will benefit from this. Many career dads express regret, as they get older, that they did not spend more time parenting their children.

Do's

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There are some really important things you should do to ensure shared parenting works for you, your ex and above all your children.

- Open Dialogue - Decide from day one, to making shared parenting an open dialogue with your ex. Arrange to do this through email, texting, voicemail, letters. Move on to face to face conversation as soon as that is realistic. You can use a unique email or WhatsApp group that allows you to upload schedules, share information, and communicate so you and your ex don't have to directly touch base, if that is likely to prove more challenging.
- Rules should be consistent and agreed upon at both households. As much as they fight it, children need routine and structure. Issues like mealtime, bedtime, and completing chores need to consistent. The same goes for schoolwork and projects. Running a tight ship creates a sense of security and predictability for children. Despite their superficial objections they prefer it. So, no matter which home your child is in, he or she knows that certain rules will be enforced. "You know the deal, before we can go to the movies, you've got to complete your homework." Children can adapt quickly and easily between sets of rules so not everything has to be perfectly the same, just clear, fair, consistent and explained with consequences for not complying.
- Commit to positive talk around the house. Make it a rule to frown upon your children talking disrespectfully about your ex even though it may be music to your ears. Not even a secret smirk!
- Agree boundaries with your ex, on behavioural guidelines for raising your children so that there's consistency in their lives, regardless of which parent they're with at any given time. This needs to be written down and agreed between you and your ex following consultation with your child. Including consequences for non-compliance. This is an opportunity for you to show how cooperative, supportive, and willing to compromise you can be. Research shows that children in homes with a unified parenting approach have greater well-being.
- Create an Extended Family Plan. Negotiate and agree on the role extended family members or friends will play and the access they will be granted while your child is in each other's charge. The best arrangement is you decide while your child is with you but this may need to be a negotiated transition. Ideally, children should continue to mix with all the important people to them prior to your separation once you no longer live together. It provides a sense of continuity and security. It also validates each parent's role as a parent and decision maker in their lives.

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- Recognise that shared parenting will challenge you - and the reason for making accommodations in your parenting style, is not because your ex wants this or that, but for the needs of your children. Often you will find, if you take out the bad feelings about your ex, then the differing arrangements demanded by your ex make little difference to you or your child. Negotiate for what you think is right, but don't get hung up on small points of different parenting style, most especially if you are not the main carer with over 50% of overnight stays.
- Keep off the 'slippery slope' on boundaries. Be aware that children will frequently test boundaries and rules, especially if there is a chance to get something, they may not ordinarily be able to obtain. Therefore, a united front in shared parenting is recommended. The answer to the "Mum says I can…" demand is "Fine I'll just give her a ring to be sure". The same applies if the child tries it on with dads. Children will test parents like this as part of growing up.
- Be boring. Research shows that children need time to do ordinary things with their less-seen parent, not just fun things. Just let them adjust in their own time. Time spent with you does not have to be a roundabout of fun and excitement… give them space to loaf about… and sleep.
- Update your ex often (unless banned by court order from contacting her/him). Although it may be emotionally painful, make sure that you and your ex keep each other informed about all changes in your life, or circumstances that are challenging or difficult. It is important that your child is never, ever, ever the primary source of information. New partners will be a big problem for your ex and your children. Give their introduction to your family considerable thought and ensure they understand your children come first… always.
- Acknowledge the good things about your ex. Each of you has valuable strengths as a parent. Remember to recognise the different traits you and your ex have - and reinforce this awareness with your children. Speaking positively about your ex teaches children that despite your differences, you can still appreciate positive things about them. "Mummy's really good at making you feel better when you're sick. I know, I'm not as good as she is at painting." It also directs children to see the positive qualities in both his or her parent too. "Daddy's much better at organising things than I am." Praise ensures good behaviour is repeated and it works not just for kids!

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Don’ts

There are key errors that are easy to make, particularly when relationships are strained. Avoiding these will be healthy for your child and likely to reduce tensions and avoid conflict with your ex when sharing parenting.

- Don't burden your child. Emotionally charged issues about your ex should never be part of your parenting. Never sabotage your child's relationship with your ex by trash talking. Never use your child to gain information about things going on or to sway your ex about an issue. Despite what you think about your ex, your kids still love them. They do not want you being nasty about somebody they love, especially when they love you too. The main thing here is this: Don't expose children to conflict. Research shows that putting children in the middle of your adult issues promotes feelings of helplessness and insecurity, causing children to question themselves and forcing them to make choices between parents.
- Don't jump to conclusions or condemn your ex. When you hear things from your children that make you upset, take a breath and remain quiet. Remember that any negative comments your children make are often best taken with a grain of salt. It's always good to remain neutral when things like this happen. Research shows that your child can learn to resent and distrust you if support their bad comments. Often they say things just to see your reaction. Make sure it is the right one.
- Don't be an unbalanced parent. Resist being the fun and excitement dad or the open-minded flexible mum when your children are with you. Doing so backfires once they return to your ex - and sets into motion a cycle of resentment, hostility, and a reluctance to follow rules for all involved. Remember that children develop best with a united front. Shared parenting with a healthy dose of fun, a good sense of humour, structure and predictability is a win-win for everyone.
- Don't give in to guilt. Divorce is a painful experience, and one that conjures up many emotions. Not being in your child's life on a full-time basis can cause you to convert your guilt into overindulgence. Don’t start to spoil your kids when they are with you. Understand the psychology of parental guilt - and how to recognise that granting wishes without limits is never good. Research shows that children can become self-centred, lack empathy, and believe in the need to get unrealistic entitlement from others. Confusion in understanding the dynamics of need versus want, as well as taming impulsivity becomes troublesome for children to negotiate too.
- Don't punish your ex by allowing your child to wiggle out of responsibility. Loosening the reigns because you just want to be a thorn in your ex's side is a big no-no. "I know

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mummy likes you to get your homework done first, but you can do that later." "Don't tell Daddy I gave you the extra money to buy the video game you've been working towards." If you need to get your negative emotions out, find another outlet. Voodoo dolls (only kidding), gym training and kick boxing can yield the same results, but with less of a parenting mess. Remember, work before play is a golden rule - and one that will help your child throughout their lifetime. Making sure to be consistent helps your child transition back and forth from your ex - and back and forth to you too.

- Don't accuse. Discuss. Never remain quiet if something about your ex's shared parenting is troubling you. If you don't have a good personal relationship with your ex, create a working business arrangement. Communication about shared parenting is vital for your child's healthy development. No finger wagging at your ex or “you-keep-doing-this” kind of talk. The best approach when communicating is to make your child the focal point: "I see the kids doing this-and-that after they return home from their visit. Any ideas of what we can do?" Notice there's not one "you" word in there. No accusatory tone or finger-pointing.

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