

We asked our experts for their best rules for making shared child access work for you, your ex, and your kids.

Coordinating schedules, Divvying up holidays, Shuffling kids between houses, sharing child access isn't always easy, especially when you're trying to agree with someone you couldn't stand being married to. The good news: "Studies show that shared-access situations work best when both parents are cooperative, respectful, agree on shared access, and manage their emotions," says JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and author of *Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies to Help Children Thrive Through Divorce*. "These qualities make it more likely that parents will help their children adjust to family changes." We asked our experts for their best rules for making shared child access work for you, your ex, and your kids.

Rule #1: Speak no evil.

Expert after expert (most of whom were divorced themselves) repeated this: Don't speak poorly about your ex. "Badmouthing the ex will be internalised by the child because they are made up of both you and your ex," says David Pisarra, fathers' rights Lawyer at MensFamilyLaw.com and author of *A Man's Guide To Child Custody*. "What you say about the ex is what the child will react to, and also think about themselves." Even though you may be pissed at your ex, your child still loves him or her as a parent. Regardless of your feelings about your ex - justified or not - keep them to yourself.

Rule #2: It's not about you.

The divorce was about you, but access is about the kids. "Divorce causes emotional tunnel vision and people get so focused on their own hurts and needs that they lose sight of the goal of creating a good childhood," Pisarra says. Access is not about getting exactly what you want, or even demanding equity at any cost. "The hardest part for co-parents is remembering that time with the child is not a prize to be won, but a gift to be cherished," Pisarra says. Shared access works best when both parents set aside their ego and realise that what is best for the child is not always what feels good for you as a parent."

Rule #3: Be realistic about your own schedule and commitments.

"Often during a separation or divorce, parents make unrealistic access grabs based on fear or insecurity," says Laura Wasser, a celebrity divorce attorney in Los Angeles and author of the new book *It Doesn't Have to Be That Way*. Instead, look at access as a business arrangement. Remove your emotions from the situation and look at the facts.

Rule #4: Choose access arrangements that accommodate your children's ages, activities, and needs.

When deciding on access arrangement, you'll want to take the following into consideration.

- 1. Your children's ages and personalities*
- 2. Your family schedule*
- 3. The career and social commitments of each parent*
- 4. The academic and extracurricular activities to which your children are committed*
- 5. Your child-care arrangements and the distance between the parents' homes.*

Here are three of the most common joint access arrangements:

- 1) The child/children spend every second weekend with one parent and also have evening access once or twice during the non-access period. The child spends the evening with the non-access parent but does not sleep over.
- 2) An extended alternating weekend arrangement where the child/children spend 3 or 4 or 5 nights a week with one parent and the rest with the other parent. Again, access is recommended for the non-access parent during long periods of separation from the children. Long periods of separation can be as little as 3 nights depending on the age of the children.
- 3) Alternate week plan week 1 with Mum, week 2 with Dad, and so on.

Infants usually remain in the care of the primary carer, but some toddlers and preschool-age children can benefit from switching back and forth between households. "Generally, mental health practitioners who specialise in development recommend that for younger children, more frequent contact with both parents is beneficial,"

Rule #5: A bad spouse doesn't equal a bad parent.

Your ex may have dropped the ball and driven you crazy, but Wasser reminds her clients that "even though he or she may not have been a good

spouse, it is still possible for him or her to be a good parent." In most cases, Wasser says, "it is unquestionably best for children to have frequent and continuous contact with both parents." Your marriage may not have worked, but your parenting can still succeed. "For good or bad, the child wants and needs to feel the love of both of parents," Pisarra says. How to do that? Put the needs and well-being of your children first. "Remember that when the children are with your ex, they are with the one person in the world who loves and cares about them as much as you," Wasser says.

Rule #6: Find an agreeable way to communicate

For joint child access to work, communication is key. For the sake of your children (and your sanity), you need to find a method of communication that works for you and your ex. "These days we have so many tools with which to organise access," Wasser says. "There are Google calendars, icalendars, mobile phones, texting, and emailing - all which provide parents with the ability to communicate with each other quickly." Pisarra directs his clients to the website OurFamilyWizard.com, which offers joint calendars, expense logs, common document storage for things like a child's immunisation record or school calendar, and a message board that keeps an accurate and non-modifiable record of your communications that can be admitted in court, if disagreements arise. In Australia the equivalent is OurChildren.com.au or there are APS that can help with organising families.

Rule #7: Pick your battles.

Let's be frank. Parenting is hard enough on its own, and co-parenting adds another layer of complexity. Prevent as many conflicts as possible with your ex by open communication, but when disagreements do arise, consider if the conflict is truly worth fighting over. "Try to be as rational about your positions as possible and remember that if a judge has to decide it, no one will like the decision most likely" Pisarra advises. "Fight only for the things that are worth fighting for. School choices, vacations, and parenting time are worth the fight. Things like food choices, unless there's a known medical issue like diabetes or food allergies, are not worth the fight." Save your energy and good will with your ex and the courts for those things that do matter. Remember mediation may also help you develop strategies for dealing with disputes.

Rule #8: Let your child feel heard. (have a voice)

A child experiences lots of change during a divorce. Allowing the child to express feelings and confusions about the divorce and access arrangement can help him/her feel a sense of control in the midst of all that change. "Children need to have input in the process, and depending on how old they

are," Pisarra says. "That can be a simple matter with preteens, or hard to discern with toddlers." Involving your 5-year-old might mean letting him choose which Lego sets he wants to bring to his dad's house. Involving preteens and teenagers in creating an access schedule can help ensure the schedule meshes with the teen's extracurricular activities. Plus, a child who feels that his input was received is more likely to be agreeable to the schedule. But, says Wasser, "While it is important to listen to your children and hear their feelings, impressions and preferences, the child's opinion is only one factor that goes into making child-access decisions." Let your children feel heard, but also make the best decision for their well-being. If you are finding it difficult to distinguish between your ex-partners opinions and your child's, Child Inclusive Mediation may be the solution.

Rule #9: From time to time, review the arrangement and adjust as needed.

Just as your kids will grow and change over time, so should your access arrangement. "Many parents find it helpful to review access agreements from time to time to assess how it is working for their children and to make adjustments, particularly as children grow and circumstances change," says Dr. Pedro-Carroll. You and your ex may change too. Says Wasser: "If you are hoping to eventually get to an equal time share arrangement but have not historically spent as much time parenting, gradual increases are recommended."

Bayside Mediation helps couples formalise there parenting arrangements into a Parenting Plan. For further information about Parenting Plans

Call 03 9553 6491

Email: info@baysidemediation.com.au