

THE STRAITS TIMES

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

How to co-parent well after divorce

Have mutual respect and trust, and avoid common pitfalls such as assigning blame, experts say



Parents should agree on and follow clear guidelines on household rules, schedules and discipline for the child, as well as jointly decide on matters such as her medical needs and education. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



Venessa Lee

PUBLISHED 7 HOURS AGO

Secrets, spying, interrogation.

It sounds like an espionage novel, but these are some common mistakes that divorced parents make.

Mr Ronald Lim, senior counsellor at Reach Community Services Society, says former spouses should not make their children unwitting pawns in their disputes.

"Let go of the past and of your unhappiness with the other parent. Allow the children to enjoy their access time with the other parent," he adds.

"Do not interrogate the children about what they did when they spent time with the other parent. Neither should you ask the kids to spy on your former spouse, or to keep secrets from your former partner."

Involving the child in disputes rather than communicating directly with your former spouse, or conflicts such as bad-mouthing the other parent, "can cause undue stress on the child and worsen his feelings of guilt and shame as he often feels helpless and caught in the middle", says Ms Theresa Pong, principal counsellor at Focus on the Family Singapore.

For some, co-parenting while divorced can be difficult.

But it is worth tamping down on any animosity between former spouses for the long-term benefit of the children.

A landmark study released last month, titled Intergenerational Effects Of Divorce On Children In Singapore, examined the marital and economic records of more than 100,000 Singaporeans, of whom 9,000 experienced parental divorce before the age of 21. It found that their parents' divorce inflicted a toll on key areas of their lives into adulthood.

At age 35, these adults, whose parents divorced before they turned 21, earned less than peers whose parents stayed together, and they themselves were more likely to get divorced, according to the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) study, the first local one of its kind.

Counsellors say mutual respect and trust between former partners are key to making children of divorce feel loved and secure.

Let go of the past and of your unhappiness with the other parent. Allow the children to enjoy their access time with the other parent.

REACH COMMUNITY SERVICES SOCIETY SENIOR COUNSELLOR RONALD LIM, who adds that former spouses should not interrogate their children about what they did with the other parent, or ask them to spy on or keep secrets from their former partner

”

Divorce specialists weigh in on how to mitigate the adverse effects of divorce by avoiding common pitfalls while co-parenting.

5 tips to avoid common co-parenting pitfalls

1. TALK TO THE KIDS ABOUT THE DIVORCE

Some parents assume their kids know about them separating, without needing to be told explicitly.

"However, this often leads to children drawing their own conclusions about the reasons for the divorce. Many children blame themselves," says Ms Chrys Ong, manager at Care Corner Singapore's Centre for Co-Parenting, a divorce support specialist agency appointed by the MSF.

She has come across a parent who stated in her affidavit that her husband stopped loving her after she gave birth to their daughter. The girl read the statement and blamed herself for being born and causing her parents to split up.

Ms Ong suggests that parents should communicate their break-up to the child together, and assure the child that he can approach them if he has any questions.

She cautions parents not to expect immediate feedback from the child, but to give him time to digest the information, as it would be a shock to him.

2. THERE IS NO NEED TO TELL THE 'WHOLE TRUTH'

Parents often want to share the truth about why their marriage failed, wanting the child to be on their side and assigning blame to their former spouse, says Ms Ong. They may even share details like evidence of infidelity with the child, to her

detriment.

"It affects the child's relationship with the other parent and impacts her views on marriage, values, fidelity and trust," Ms Ong adds.

"Sometimes, children do not need to know the whole truth. They need the assurance that they will still be taken care of and loved by both parents."

Instead, Ms Ong says, the child needs to know:

- Will things remain the same?
- What is going to change; where will I live and will I still go to the same school?
- What is the plan for me?

3. DO NOT INSIST ON EQUALITY

"Some parents insist their child should spend equal time with both parents, but this may not be in the child's best interest as his routine and lifestyle are disrupted," Ms Ong says.

"Focus on what is the best arrangement for the child."

For instance, if parents want the child to split his time equally between two homes, he has to remember to pack his school books and materials several days ahead.

Similarly, some parents want to cut down on their maintenance contribution so expenses are shared fairly, says Ms Ong.

But the child should be provided with appropriate financial support so he has the same quality of life as before, she adds.

4. SET CLEAR PARENTING GUIDELINES

Clashing parenting styles can be exacerbated after a divorce.

Ms Pong from Focus on the Family Singapore says parents should agree on and follow clear parenting guidelines on issues such as when bedtime is; when homework should be completed; and the kinds of activities that should be avoided, including when visiting the other parent.

Another expert says parents should make other important decisions together too.

Besides consistent co-parenting in terms of household rules, schedules and discipline for the child, parents should jointly decide on matters such as the medical needs and education of the child, says Mr Wilson Mack, clinical director for Thye Hua Kwan Family Services Division, Thye Hua Kwan Centre for Family Harmony. The centre is a divorce support specialist agency.

5. INVOLVE THE GRANDPARENTS

Visitation arrangements can be boring or unpleasant for a child if he is scolded or asked to account for his time spent with the other parent.

Besides having a simple planned activity during the child's access time with a parent, "having extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles or other relatives around can help the child build valuable human connections", says Mr Mack.

Both parents should try to help each other make visitation experiences pleasant, he says.

For example, when the child goes to the non-residential parent's home for a few days, packing for the stay can be made easier by keeping a toothbrush, hairbrush and pyjamas at both homes.

•Get the ST Smart Parenting newsletter for expert advice. Go to str.sg/smartparenting for more <http://str.sg/smartparentingstories>.

Get the ST Smart Parenting newsletter for expert advice. Visit the microsite for more.

RECOMMENDED

Singapore's

Actors Ada

How to style

[Images]

Ad

Ad