

The 10 Most Common Co-Parenting Traps

What to watch for and how to step around them

STILL DAD

1 Using the Kids as Messengers

Sending information, requests, or grievances through the kids instead of communicating directly. This puts children in the middle and forces them to carry adult weight.

Step around it: All logistics go adult-to-adult. Never ask the kids to relay a message, confirm a schedule, or report on the other household.

2 Reacting to Every Provocation

Treating every hostile message, late pickup, or minor violation as something that requires an immediate, forceful response. Constant reaction drains you and rewards the behavior.

Step around it: Decide in advance what rises to the level of formal response. Let small things go. Document everything, but respond selectively.

3 Badmouthing in Earshot

Making negative comments about the other parent when the kids can hear: even casually, even "venting" to someone on the phone. Kids remember everything and internalize it as commentary on themselves.

Step around it: Vent to friends, a therapist, or a notebook. Never where they can hear. Their other parent is half of them.

4 Making Every Handoff Tense

Treating the exchange as an opportunity to settle scores, air grievances, or demonstrate control. Kids pick up on the tension immediately and carry it into the next household.

Step around it: Keep handoffs short and boring. Say goodbye, say hello, say nothing else. Two minutes max.

5 Competing for the Kids' Approval

Trying to be the "fun parent" as a way of winning: no rules, all treats, unlimited screens. Usually comes from guilt. Backfires when kids see through it or lose respect for you as a parent.

Step around it: Structure and consistency are love. You can be fun and still have bedtimes.

6 Over-Explaining Your Decisions

Justifying every parenting choice to your co-parent, as if you still need their approval. You don't. Over-explaining invites argument and signals that you don't trust your own authority.

Step around it: Communicate what they need to know. Not why you did what you did. Not a defense. Just facts.

7 Letting Guilt Drive Your Parenting

Making parenting decisions based on what reduces your guilt rather than what's actually good for the kids. Guilt is a poor compass.

Step around it. Ask yourself: am I doing this for them, or to feel better about myself? The honest answer will tell you what to do.

8 Fighting Over Things That Don't Matter in 5 Years

Using up legal fees, emotional energy, and the kids' stability on disputes that genuinely don't matter long-term. Every fight has a real cost.

Step around it. Ask: will this matter in five years? If no, decide quickly and move on. Save your energy for what actually does.

9 Expecting the Same House Rules

Demanding that your household rules be followed at the other home, or getting upset when they aren't. Two homes will always operate differently. That's okay.

Step around it: Your home, your rules. Their home, their rules. Explain your expectations to the kids clearly, then let them navigate the difference.

10 Trying to Be Friends Before You're Ready

Forcing a "friendly co-parenting" dynamic before the emotional dust has settled. Results in confused boundaries, reopened wounds, and misread signals.

Step around it: The goal right now is functional, not friendly. Businesslike is the right tone. Friendly can come later, if it comes at all.

You will probably fall into at least a few of these. Most dads do. The point is to recognize it quickly, course-correct, and not stay in the trap.