



## INFORMATION FOR CLIENTS OF TEXAS ATTORNEYS

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# The Ex-Files: How and Why to Get Along with Your Former Spouse

BY JOAN NORTON

If you have children, divorce changes — rather than ends — the relationship you share. Your happiness now rests on making your divorce succeed even if your marriage failed. But how?

### Restructure the Relationship

Instead of interacting as husband and wife (which you no longer are), it is very liberating to form a completely new businesslike relationship with your ex-spouse. It will feel strange at first, but treating your former mate as a business partner or acquaintance is your ticket to a happy future. Recognize that while the marriage has ended, the unfinished business of raising the children still remains. To effectively transact this business over

the coming months and years, you and your ex must move away from the emotional attachments of a marriage or other long-term relationship and back to a businesslike acquaintanceship.

### Behave as Acquaintances

An acquaintance is the pharmacist, the waiter, or the business associate we interact with only for work. When we speak to the pharmacist, we give her the prescription and she fills it. The pharma-

cist presents us with a bill and we pay it. If the pharmacist asks how we're doing, we reply, "Fine, thank you," even if we're having a lousy day. Business partners and associates do their business courteously and efficiently while maintaining a low emotional profile. They work to fulfill a shared goal. The hallmarks of a businesslike relationship are formal courtesies, public meetings, written contracts, little confrontation, low personal disclosure, and high personal privacy.





### Exercise Courtesy and Respect — No Matter What

In a businesslike relationship, the parties treat each other with courtesy and respect — even if they have to fake it until they make it. The “Courtesy and Respect Rule” is empowering because no matter how your ex behaves, your plan of action remains clear and unchanged. You don’t need to wait helplessly, hoping your ex will act like less of a jerk tomorrow than he or she did yesterday. Starting today, you take the lead in a positive way.

Adopting courtesy and respect models positive social behavior for your children; it also creates an important island of safety for your child. While the behavior of your ex may remain frightening and unpredictable, at least your child will have the comfort of knowing that when mother and father are together, one parent will always remain in control and speak respectfully. While you may feel your former mate doesn’t deserve courteous treatment, your children have the right to see their mother and father behaving respectfully toward one another.

### Enforce Your Boundaries

You and your ex have a history together; be prepared to enforce your new boundaries. Limit your conversations to your shared goal of raising the children. For example, the child’s health, school performance, and activities are acceptable topics. Matters such as the dating habits of your ex, past mistakes, and differences in appropriate parenting styles are off-limits. Also realize that cooperating with your ex in a businesslike way does not mean accepting abusive treatment. Seek counseling or dial 911 or (800) 799-SAFE (7233), if you or your children are in danger.

### Cut the Emotional Ties

Clearly, there’s no automatic breaker switch to flip; feeling comfortable in your new relationship takes time. The

key is cutting your emotional attachments to your former mate. Do this by focusing on your role as parent, rather than your former role as spouse. Find new sources of emotional support, such as new friends, support groups, or counseling. Avoid leaning on your children; children need to know you will take care of them, not the other way around.

Cutting the ties is worth the effort because remaining attached to your ex keeps your life in limbo, consumes your energy, and prevents you from finding happiness in a new, better relationship. It can damage your children, too. When parents remain emotionally attached through hostility, bitterness, and destructive game playing, their children feel these adult vendettas very deeply. Ongoing conflict between the parents is the No. 1 cause of suffering, stress, and maladjustment in children of divorce.

### Protect Your Pocketbook

Getting along with your former mate is good not only for your children, but also for your pocketbook. Parents who can solve their differences within the parameters of their divorce decree will avoid the emotional and financial drain of returning to court later with issues such as child access, visitation, and even custody disputes. Knowing ways to prevent a minor disagreement from morphing into a full-scale custody battle is so useful that many family court judges are mandating parent education classes — including conflict resolution strategies — as a prerequisite to granting a divorce involving minor children. It’s actually quite practical: Investing a bit of time and effort on the front end learning the ropes of successful shared parenting can save a boatload of heartache and expense on the back end.

### Discover Resources

Your county’s Domestic Relations Office can be a goldmine of information. Ask about books, counseling, and classes

to assist you. If no local office exists, go online. Visit [211Texas.org](http://211Texas.org) to locate a range of social services by zip code — the site offers everything from food pantries to mediation services to childcare. Specialty classes to assist children and step-parents may also be available. Texas residents can call 211 to receive social services information 24/7, in more than a dozen languages. Don’t give up. Your children are counting on you. ☘



**JOAN NORTON, J.D.**, believes parenting is an important job. She manages the website [txparent.com](http://txparent.com) in Austin.

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