

FEEDING THE FAMILY BOND:

CO-PARENTING STRATEGIES FOR HEALTHY, HAPPY KIDS

by Cassie Story, RD



Co-parenting after a divorce comes with its own set of challenges, especially when it comes to agreeing on nutrition and lifestyle choices for your children. When you live separately and lead different lives, the unified front you once had as parents can start to show some cracks.

One parent prefers organic and whole foods, cooking colorful and nutritious meals. Meanwhile, the other finds comfort and convenience in the predictable smiles that fast food and ready-to-eat meals bring to their children's faces after a long day. These differences can make it difficult to keep a consistent and healthy eating routine for the kids.

Despite these challenges, finding common ground and mutual understanding is not only possible but essential for your children's well-being. Let's look at some practical ways to improve communication and ideas for handling special dietary needs in two different households.

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Understanding Your Nutrition Philosophies

The first step in co-parenting regarding nutrition and lifestyle changes is to understand your own approach to food and lifestyle. This self-reflection isn't just about choosing between kale and chicken nuggets; it's about recognizing the values you associate with food and lifestyle choices. Are you aiming for healthy meals to support physical well-being, or do you prefer comfort foods that bring joy and a sense of security during a time of change?

To establish a clear nutrition philosophy in your new household, consider these tips:

1. Reflection and Goals: Think about your personal values surrounding health and wellness. Ask yourself what is most important for you and your children's well-being. Is it the nutritional value of the food, the joy and comfort it brings, or a balance of both? Setting clear goals based on these reflections will guide your nutrition choices.



2. Research and Education: Learn about different dietary philosophies and nutritional guidelines. You don't need to become an expert overnight, but understanding more about nutrition can help clarify your approach. Look into reputable sources to learn about balanced diets, the importance of various food groups and the impact of food choices on children's health and mood.



3. Open Dialogue: Have open and honest conversations with your children about their likes, dislikes and how certain foods make them feel. It's also helpful to discuss food as fuel for their bodies and minds, encouraging a balanced approach to eating.



Bridging the Nutritional Divide

Once both parents understand each other's nutrition philosophies, the next step is to find a middle ground. This doesn't mean one parent has to completely adopt the other's outlook, but rather find ways to integrate aspects of both philosophies into your children's lives. For example, you might agree on a set number of home-cooked meals a week or decide that treats and fast food can be part of a balanced diet in moderation.

Strategies for Aligning on Nutrition Across Households:

- **Shared Meal Planning:** Use technology to share meal plans or favorite recipes through apps or shared digital folders.
- **Education Through Involvement:** Involve your children in the meal-preparation process, whether at the farmer's market or while cooking. Education about nutrition can be a shared value, regardless of the specific food choices made in each household.
- **Celebrate Food Diversity:** Use the differences in dietary approaches as an opportunity to teach children about food diversity, nutrition and balance. Help them understand that different doesn't mean wrong, and encourage them to appreciate varied approaches to healthy eating.

Communicating Across Households

Effective communication is key to successful co-parenting relationships. When communication is empathetic, free of judgment or blame and focused on your children's well-being, it can open doors to constructive conversations and collaborative solutions.

Tips for Effective, Empathetic Communication:

- **Focus on the Goal:** Keep all discussions centered around the shared goal of your children's well-being. This mindset can lead to more productive conversations.
- **Active Listening:** Truly listen to the other parent's perspective without preparing a counterargument. This can create space for understanding and compromise.
- **Respect Boundaries:** Establish boundaries around communication—when and how you'll discuss matters—to ensure that conversations are respectful and purposeful.

Navigating Special Dietary Concerns

Special dietary needs—from allergies to ethical beliefs—can make co-parenting more complicated. It's important to align on how to manage these needs between households to ensure your child's health and well-being.

Managing Special Dietary Concerns Effectively:

- **Unified Approach:** Agree on a clear and consistent way to handle dietary needs, making sure both households follow the necessary guidelines. This might involve educational sessions for both parents to fully understand the dietary requirements.
- **Open Dialogue with Children:** Involve your children in discussions about their dietary needs, helping them understand why certain foods are off-limits or prioritized. Empowering them with knowledge can help them make informed choices, even when you're not around.
- **Support Network:** Establish a support network that includes family members, school officials and healthcare providers. Ensure everyone is informed and aligned on your child's dietary needs. This network provides additional support and consistency across both households.



Crafting Moments of Togetherness Through Food

In co-parenting, where dietary habits and lifestyle choices may vary, there are special opportunities to create shared moments centered around meals. These moments can become milestones of partnership and mutual respect among parents, teaching children that despite changes in their family structure, collaboration and happiness are still possible.

Ideas for Creating Shared Food Experiences:

- **Seasonal Cooking and Baking Projects:** Engage in joint cooking or baking projects that celebrate different times of the year, like making homemade ice cream in the summer or picking apples and baking pie in the fall. These activities can be planned during shared custody times or as special occasions for both parents to participate in, regardless of the custody schedule.
- **Cultural Exploration Through Food:** Take your children on a culinary world tour from your respective kitchens. Choose different countries to explore through their traditional dishes, encouraging an appreciation for diversity and broadening their palate.
- **Gardening:** If space permits, start a small garden where your children can grow fruits, vegetables or herbs. This can be a project in both homes, with the children responsible for maintaining their garden patch under the guidance of both parents. It teaches responsibility and the value of hard work while showing how nurturing care can result in growth, a metaphor for their family situation.
- **Cookbook Creation:** Document these culinary adventures by creating a family cookbook with recipes, photos and shared memories from both households. This ongoing project allows for reflection and appreciation of positive moments together, which can remind all family members of the shared love in co-parenting.

Creating these shared food experiences requires a willingness to enter the kitchen, whether literally or metaphorically, with an open heart and mind. By blending patience, flexibility and creativity, you not only nourish the body but also heal and strengthen family bonds, making every meal a step toward unity and understanding.

Navigating co-parenting requires patience, empathy and teamwork. Despite challenges, the shared goal of your children's health and happiness can guide you.

About the Author:

Cassie Story, RD, is a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist with 19 years of experience in treating patients who have undergone metabolic and bariatric surgery or are seeking medical weight-loss. She is currently the Director of Nutrition for Bariatric Advantage and a Peer Reviewer for Obesity Surgery. Cassie is also active in the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC). A national speaker and published author, she enjoys hiking and creating new recipes in her spare time.





ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

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- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
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