ALL IN THE FAMILY

Legal blog on all aspects of Family Law and Divorce in Massachusetts and Rhode Island

Back to School During Divorce: Put Your Kids First

BY ROBIN M. LYNCH NARDONE • AUGUST 18, 2026

For many families, the start of a new school year is exciting. New teachers, new classmates, fresh notebooks, and the return to fall sports. For children whose parents are separated or going through a divorce, back-to-school season can also bring up uncertainty and anxiety.

When school starts, it's important to remember that your child isn't thinking about court dates, parenting plans, or child support payments. They're wondering whether they'll make friends, remember their locker combination, or if the cafeteria will serve pizza. If you have middle-school or high-school aged children, they have the burden of worrying about class schedules, heavy workloads, and keeping up their grades.

The best gift you can give your child this school year is the reassurance that both of their parents are on the same team.

DON'T TURN SCHOOL INTO ANOTHER BATTLEGROUND

It's understandable that emotions can run high during a divorce. However, children should never feel like they're caught in the middle of their parents' conflict. That means avoiding unnecessary disputes over things that should be simple.

For example, resist the temptation to buy an entirely separate set of school supplies just to avoid coordinating with your co-parent—or worse, to make a point. Duplicating everything out of spite doesn't benefit your child. Instead, communicate about what has already been purchased so your child has what they need without feeling like they're living in two competing households. Your child does not need or want a blue backpack at dad's house and a green one at mom's house.

Similarly, try not to argue over who gets the "honor" of dropping your child off on the first day of school. While it's a meaningful milestone, children are often far more aware of parental tension than parents realize. If the conversation about first-day drop-off turns into an argument, the memory your child carries may not be the excitement of starting school—it may be the conflict between their parents.

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Sometimes sharing the moment, alternating years, or simply following your parenting schedule can be a healthier approach than turning the occasion into a contest.

KEEP COMMUNICATION CHILD-FOCUSED

Successful co-parenting doesn't require you to be best friends. It requires you to make decisions based on what's best for your child.

As the school year begins, consider working together on practical issues like:

- Sharing important school calendars and event dates
- Making sure both parents receive communications from teachers and the school
- Coordinating transportation and after-school activities well in advance
- Agreeing on homework expectations so your child experiences consistency in both homes
- Discussing extracurricular activities before signing your child up

When parents communicate respectfully about school-related matters, children feel more secure and less responsible for managing adult conflict. If talking to or texting with your co-parent is difficult, use one of the many available parental apps that help to facilitate communication.

PRESENT A UNITED FRONT

Children benefit from knowing that both parents are invested in their education.

Whenever possible, attend parent-teacher conferences, school performances, sporting events, and other important milestones without creating unnecessary tension. If sitting together at events isn't realistic, be respectful of one another's presence by saying hello before choosing separate locations from which to support your child.

Your child shouldn't have to worry about where to sit at a school concert or whether saying hello to one parent will upset the other. And they certainly do not want to see their parents arguing on the sidelines.

HELP EASE BACK-TO-SCHOOL ANXIETY

Starting a new school year can be stressful even in the most stable circumstances. During a divorce, children often carry additional worries that they may not express openly.

You can help by:

- Maintaining consistent routines in both households
- Talking positively about school and encouraging questions
- Giving your child permission to be excited about spending time with both parents
- Avoiding negative comments about your co-parent in front of your child
- Keeping adult disagreements away from school events and extracurricular activities
- Checking in regularly about how they're adjusting instead of assuming everything is fine

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REMEMBER WHAT THEY'LL REMEMBER

Years from now, your child probably won't remember who bought the pencils or who won the argument over first-day drop-off. They will remember how they felt on that first day. Did they have to navigate a big blow-up between their parents at the bus stop? Or is their memory of how they made a new friend on the bus after an uneventful pick up at the end of the driveway?

Divorce changes many aspects of family life, but it doesn't have to define your child's school experience. By approaching the new school year with cooperation, flexibility, and a commitment to putting your child's needs first, you can help make back-to-school season one of confidence instead of conflict. There is a song lyric that says, "let them be little…cause they're only that way for a while." There are only so many first days of school. Let those days be about your child and not about your conflict with your co-parent.

If you're navigating a divorce or custody matter, remember that effective co-parenting isn't just good for your child—it's the foundation for a healthier, more workable parenting relationship long after the divorce is finalized.

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