

My Ex and I Fought About Everything. Then Came the Coronavirus.

Once the virus was here, his response shocked me.

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As coronavirus continues to spread across the globe, we're working to answer the questions on many parents' minds. This is a fast-moving situation, so some information may be outdated. For the latest updates, read The New York Times's live coronavirus coverage here.

Nearly two months ago, when the new coronavirus was upending life in China, I felt for those living through this nightmare. As the news became more and more dire, I began worrying about the virus making its way to the United States. I cycled through anxieties about illness and quarantine, but my biggest fear was how my soon-to-be-ex-husband and I would handle this.

We share custody of our two boys, ages 6 and almost 4, and at that time, we argued about almost everything. We both wanted our kids to be healthy, but we rarely agreed on what that looked like. To him, the boys needed to eat all their vegetables. To me, meals shouldn't be a battle. On sunny days, I slathered the boys in sunscreen. My ex wanted them to soak in the rays and get enough vitamin D.

Our constant fighting — about way more than just parenting — led us to file for divorce 18 months ago. Now, living apart, I hope he's putting sunscreen on the kids, and I'm sure he hopes I'm making them eat all their veggies. But frankly, there isn't much either of us can do about it.

Then came the coronavirus.

Throw a pandemic into the mix of a fraught divorce, and who knows what might happen.

I had feared that when the virus came here my ex and I would be on different pages about how to handle it. What happens if I followed the rules, but he kept up his normal routine? I imagined having no option but to send my children to his house, where they could get infected.

[What parents should know about the coronavirus.]

I couldn't discuss any of this with him. So I did the only thing possible: I ordered more ramen.

As I read about families under lockdown, I imagined myself home alone with my boys. What would happen if one of them got a fever, and I needed to take him to the pediatrician, but I didn't have a partner who could stay home with the healthy kid? I recalled scenes of Wuhan's overrun hospitals. Would I have to bring both of my boys into a doctor's office filled with ill patients?

I shopped more, ordering disinfectant wipes and laundry detergent.

What if I got sick? I wondered: How do single parents take care of themselves and their children?

I bought cough syrup and children's Tylenol.

In late February I told my therapist I was displacing my anxiety about being a single parent and our looming divorce trial onto the virus. She nodded along, agreeing that my stress was connected to my situation. But somewhere during the session, I accidentally convinced her that my anxiety was warranted. As she left, she said she needed to go shopping.

I drove my family nuts with all of my worries, but I decided not to talk to my ex about it. I feared that if I tried giving him rules or even made suggestions, it could backfire.

I waited. And waited. Finally, once it was clear the virus was in the New York area, and we started discussing the situation, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that we had come to the same conclusions independently. We both stopped traveling, and we agreed that if one of us started developing symptoms, we'd tell the other.

One morning I found a WhatsApp message from him asking if he should send the boys to school that day. He wanted to make such a difficult decision together. I almost burst into tears from relief.

We're now on the same page about rules for the kids in terms of social distancing. No more play dates. Yes, they can go in the backyard; no, they can't go to playgrounds. After the boys and I made a schedule for their days home, I texted an image of it to my ex, asking if it looked good to him too. He agreed to it. The same schedule in both houses. Wow.

(As I wrote this, he messaged me a link to Scholastic's digital hub for distance learning. I responded with information about the Cincinnati Zoo's virtual safaris. It's like we're sane adults.)

Under normal circumstances, divorce and co-parenting can be a struggle. Every holiday this year was miserable, even Presidents' Day. But now, I'm finding a silver lining. It's been only a week since schools have closed, and many of my friends are desperate for a little time away from their kids. Don't hate me, but after a few days of my kids running wild in my home, I get to ship them off to their father's.

Many other single parents haven't been as lucky as me. I have friends living through what I had feared. One doesn't want to send her son to his other mother's house because she worries social-distancing precautions haven't been in place, and she fears they all could have the virus. Others have primary custody of their kids and have little to no help.

So many divorced or separated parents now have to worry about their ex's new partner who might be infected. This could be especially dangerous for those who have chronic medical conditions or live with elderly relatives. How can we protect ourselves and those in our home if we are sending our kids out into this world?

I'm part of an online support group for divorced and separated women in my area, and it's now filled with comments by mothers trying to sort out how to handle such a stressful time. Some say they don't know if they should prioritize keeping their kids isolated or ensuring they see the other parent. Many describe fighting with their exes about how each should be behaving, and say they feel helpless.

And then there are parents whose exes are no longer in the picture. A writer and mother in central Appalachia, Alison Stine, wrote in The Washington Post about the extreme difficulty of raising a child alone now.

Plus, this is only the beginning for those in the United States. We don't know how different "shelter in place" requirements will affect families that share two homes. Or what this looks like when more and more people get sick.

One of my friends, Melanie, said she'll keep seeing her boyfriend, and she knows her ex will see his fiancée, and the kids will be exposed to their families. It's worth it for their sanity. "We all just need to make the best choices we can right now," Melanie said.

For me and my ex, even if we get through the pandemic, I know we will have disagreements sooner or later. We're not suddenly going to be that divorced couple who spends holidays together. But I do hope we can use this moment as an opportunity to turn the page a bit on our approach to co-parenting. I need to start trusting that my boys' father will make the best decision he can. We share two amazing children, who need both of us. A pandemic doesn't change that; it makes it clearer.

How Are Divorced or Separated Parents Co-Parenting During Coronavirus?

Tell us your story. *

0 words

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Full name preferred

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Where do you live? *

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