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Here and Now

How to keep the noncustodial parent involved in your child's life.

By Nicholas Long and Rex Forehand

If you are a custodial parent, you may have conflict and disagreements with your ex-spouse. However, this does not mean that your child should not be involved with his or her other parent. Divorce ends a marriage, after all, not parenthood.

Why is it important that the noncustodial parent stay involved? First, as Frank Furstenberg and Christine Nord of the University of Pennsylvania found, most children view their noncustodial parent as significant in their lives. Second, a review by Paul Amato and Joan Gilbreth found that, in divorced families, children are generally better adjusted when they have a positive relationship with the noncustodial parent. And, as Mary F. Whiteside of the Ann Arbor Center for the Family found in her research, the more frequent the visitation between a noncustodial father and his child, the better the relationship. Third, if you are the custodial parent, your child's visitation with your ex-spouse can allow you some free time — time to organize yourself, complete some tasks, and perhaps even relax. Fourth, more frequent contact with the noncustodial parent is related to more consistent child support payments, which itself is very important.

There are some conditions under which frequent contact may be less than beneficial for children. These conditions do not mean visitation should not occur; rather, these circumstances may need to be addressed so that visitation can be more pleasant and beneficial for a child.



1. Frequent contact between a noncustodial parent and a child typically means more interchanges between you and your ex-spouse. Thus, if you and your ex-spouse are engaging in high levels of heated conflict in front of your child around visitation or when the two of you meet to exchange your child, this can be detrimental.
2. Inconsistent contact, such as visits not occurring as scheduled, can have a negative effect on children. Children need consistent routines. They may also interpret broken visits as indicating a parent does not love or care for them.
3. When a particularly high conflict relationship exists between a noncustodial parent and a child, being forced to spend relatively long periods of time together may be detrimental.
4. If a noncustodial parent is irresponsible, incompetent, or perhaps mentally disturbed, the amount of time spent with that parent likely should be limited. However, if you are the custodial parent, remember that you may have hostile feelings that influence your perceptions of your ex-spouse. Also, just because an ex-spouse may not have been a good spouse does not mean that he is not an adequate parent. You chose to marry and have a child with your ex-spouse; thus, he or she cannot be all bad, right?

Encourage your ex-spouse

Ex-spouses are often willing to spend time with their children but are uncertain about exactly what role to take after the divorce. If you are the custodial parent, you need to make sure your ex-spouse understands that he or she still plays very important role in your child's life.

If you are the custodial parent, here are our recommendations on how to encourage your ex-spouse to spend time with your child:

- Maintain low levels of hostility and high levels of cooperation between the two of you to enhance the involvement of your ex-spouse with your child.
- Remember that it's not how you feel but how you act that has the greatest impact on your child. The important point is to prevent your negative feelings from controlling what you say and do in your child's presence.
- Do not criticize your ex-spouse in your child's presence. This can hurt your child's perception and relationship not only with his other parent but also with you.
- Encourage your child to initiate activities with your ex-spouse. These might involve going to a movie or special event together or any other activity that is beyond the usual and customary visitation time.
- Encourage phone calls, letters, and e-mails between your child and his other parent, especially if the other parent lives far away. Parents and children can also play games with each other over the Internet.
- Encourage your child to take items, such as his artwork and photographs, to show or give to his other parent.
- Keep a folder with information to share with the other parent. Items to keep in the folder might include report cards, schoolwork, school calendars, activity schedules, photographs, and videos. You can give these items (or copies) to your ex-spouse. Keeping him or her regularly informed about your child's life can make your former spouse feel more connected and thus more likely to continue involvement.
- Talk to your ex-spouse about the good things, not just the problems.
- Incorporate your ex-spouse into your child's special events, such as birthdays, sports activities, and holidays. By doing this, you will help your ex-spouse feel that he or she still plays an important role in his child's life.
- Help your child select cards and gifts for his other parent's birthday and special occasions (Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, etc.).
- Communicate to your ex-spouse that you appreciate his or her parenting role.

Find the right balance

How can divorced parents arrange the right amount of contact between a child and the noncustodial parent? First, the legal arrangements of your divorce likely will specify the noncustodial parent's time with the child. In ideal situations, this arrangement will be (or was) negotiated and acceptable to you, your ex-spouse, and your child. If needed, use a mediator to help find an arrangement agreeable to all. Second, for a very young child, more frequent short visits may be better initially than prolonged visits. For older children, let them have some input into the visitation schedule. Flexibility and creativity will be required with teenagers when contact with the noncustodial parent is considered.

The guiding principle should be the following: "What is in the best interest of your child?" Third — and this can be difficult — work cooperatively with your ex-spouse and your child. Take his or her needs, as well as yours, into account as visitation is arranged. Develop a predictable, but flexible, schedule. Allow flexibility to also accommodate your child's activities: don't drag him or her away from important activities in order to visit.

Here are some additional points:

- If you are the custodial parent, don't withhold contact between your ex-spouse and your child as a way to punish your ex-spouse. You will hurt your child the most.
- If you are the noncustodial parent, focus on the quality of contact, as much as the quantity. Quality time does not mean being a "Disneyland" parent but rather working (yes, it is work!) on building a positive relationship with your child. This means doing activities together, being positive with your child, and having clear rules that you consistently enforce. With an older child or teenager, you may want to involve his or her friends in

some of these activities.

- If you are the noncustodial parent and your relationship with your child is primarily negative at the moment, go slowly. Spend brief periods of time with your child and make those times very positive. Gradually, through your efforts, the relationship will turn around.
- If you are the noncustodial parent and your relationship with your child is positive, longer visits may be beneficial. They will allow you to establish regular routines where your child is more a part of your life rather than being just a visitor in your home.
- If you are a noncustodial parent, especially one who lives some distance away, there are forms of contact other than being physically together. You can telephone, write letters, and, in this age of computers, you can also e-mail your child.

Smooth out visitation transitions

As we have emphasized, it is important for your child to have frequent and predictable contact with his noncustodial parent. What this means is that there likely will be an interaction between you and your ex-spouse when your child moves from one home to the other. This transition time, which has been labeled as a "switchover," can be difficult for both of you and, particularly, for your child.

Why do children have difficulty when making the transition from one parent to the other? The foremost answer is that when parents are actively engaged in conflict with each other, children display more problems. Think about it for a moment: you and your ex-spouse may interact with each other only during times of switching your child from one home to the other. As a result, he or she sees the two of you together only at these times. If you spend this time fighting over issues like visitation and money, your child soon comes to expect the switch from one parent to the other to be loaded with conflict. As a consequence, it is not surprising that your child might display symptoms of distress.



Another reason making the transition from one parent to the other may be difficult for your child is the change that occurs as he or she moves from one home to the other. Even if parents strive for consistency between their homes, there will be differences. It sometimes takes children a while to adjust to different parenting styles, rules, and surroundings. Many children have a particularly difficult time when they return from a weekend visit. Such postweekend difficulties are sometimes referred to as "reentry problems." Switching at this time is often made more difficult by the child having to return to the reality of regular life (e.g., school night) from a relatively unstructured time over the weekend.

Children also may have difficulty with switchovers due to uncertainties. If your child, particularly if he is young, is unsure of when he will be with each parent, how long he will be with that parent, and exactly when and where he will be picked up when time with a parent ends, he may experience anxiety and distress. Be sure to tell your child, very clearly, all the details of the visitation schedule.

Switchover sites should be determined, first, by the needs of your child and, second, by the preferences of you as parents. If you and your ex-spouse frequently engage in open, hostile conflict, you are probably better off having the switchover take place in a public setting where the two of you are less likely to lose your tempers or someplace where there is little or no contact between the two of you. For example, one of you can drop your child off at a grandparent's house or at an after-school activity and the other spouse can pick him up there.

Here are some additional recommendations for making visitation transitions smooth:

- Develop a month-by-month visitation schedule, taking into account holidays, vacations, and special occasions. Each parent should have a copy of this schedule to minimize misunderstandings over when visits will occur.
- Confirm with your ex-spouse about when and where visitation "switchovers" will occur.
- Have your child ready in advance of the switchover time. Have all clothes and other items packed and ready to go.

- If your child is going to need to bring anything special along for the visit, let the other parent know in advance.
- Speak to your ex-spouse in advance of any changes in your schedule regarding visitation.
- Realize that visitation schedules may change as a function of your child's activities. Do not try to resolve these changes in front of your child during a switchover.
- Don't make your child responsible for making, canceling, or changing visitation plans. Those are your and your ex-spouse's responsibilities.
- Do not be late or fail to show up for a switchover. If this happens frequently, there is a good chance that your child will think you do not care about him or her.
- Deal with issues that need to be resolved with your ex-spouse at times other than the transition of your child from one home to the other.
- Remember, don't use your child to convey messages to your ex-spouse during the transition.

How to Handle Birthdays, Holidays, and Special Occasions



AS we have previously indicated, when you work with your ex-spouse to schedule the time that each of you spends with your child, you need to consider birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. Many factors will need to be taken into consideration, including what occasions have had the most meaning to your family, distance between parents' homes, and fairness. When deciding on the schedule, try to put yourself in your ex-spouse's shoes and think what would be fair from his or her perspective (be honest with yourself!). If you are able to cooperate with your ex-spouse, spending certain occasions (e.g., child's birthday) together with your child can send a strong and positive co-parenting message to your child. Children's input, particularly for older children and adolescents, needs to be given serious consideration. However, it is important that we point out that children often have unrealistic views and expectations of holidays. For example, they may want the three of you to spend time together on a holiday. Depending on the relationship between you and your ex-spouse, this may or may not be feasible. Here are our recommendations:

- Decide for each holiday how the two of you want to handle time with your child: splitting time, rotating holidays, or rotating a holiday across years.
- Be flexible and put your child's best interest first.
- Plan times for phone calls to and from the other parent when your child is spending holidays with you.
- Decide on holiday schedules well in advance, especially if travel plans need to be made.
- Talk to your ex-spouse about gift plans for your child so you don't buy the same things.
- Realize that it might be hard for you to spend some holidays (e.g., birthday, Christmas) without your child. If your child is not going to be with you and you anticipate difficulties, make sure you plan activities to occupy your time.

This article was adapted and excerpted from the book *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust* by Nicholas Long and Rex Forehand. The authors, well-respected psychologists and best-selling authors of *Parenting the Strong-Willed Child*, draw on the most recent research into children and divorce as well as their own clinical experience to provide proven strategies for helping children adjust after divorce. Reprinted with permission from the publisher, McGraw-Hill.

