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Handling Visitation

The idea of visitation with your own child is a ridiculous concept. Parents do not visit their children; parents live with their children. Your child has two parents who no longer live in the same home, so you each must take turns living with the child -- even if it is only for a few hours or for a weekend. Here's some advice for the custodial and non-custodial parent.

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Advice for the Non-Custodial Parent

You used to live in the same house with your child, and your activities together developed naturally. Now you see your child for visitation, and everything feels artificial. It can be hard to figure out how to have a normal life with your child when you see each other on a schedule. The first thing to do is just relax! You and your child love each other, and it really doesn't matter what you actually do as long as you're spending time together. Although you may experience bumps in the road as your child ages and as situations change, generally speaking, it will get easier.

- **You Are Not an Entertainer**

Many non-custodial parents feel as if they must entertain their children when they're together (often called the "Disneyland Dad Syndrome"). When you lived in the same house with your child, were you responsible for his or her constant entertainment? Of course not. You were two people, living under the same roof, who shared some activities. This isn't going to be as easy anymore simply because your time together is scheduled, feels more formal, and is shorter than it used to be. Some changes will be necessary, but cultivate the attitude that you're living together and that your time together is not some sacred institution that must be recognized with continual exciting events and fast-food dinners. You need to get back to being comfortable with each other.

- **Continuing Daily Activities**

Make the time you spend together feel comfortable and natural. Don't rent five videos or make plans to have a heart-to-heart chat unless this is something you normally would have done. Get out of bed when you normally would, eat together, watch TV together, play some games, but also allow for some alone time. You can be in the same home without constantly interacting with each other. It's OK to answer the phone, take out the trash, read the paper, or do your hair. The fact that you're able to act naturally will reassure your child and let him or her know that this is a real home and not a vacation spot. On the other hand, when your child is with you, you shouldn't ignore him or her.

- **Making Your Child Part of Your Home**

Your child now has two homes. Make your child comfortable in your home by giving him or her a bedroom or at least some space to call his or her own. Encourage your child to arrange and decorate the room as it suits him or her. Do not splurge or overspend on the set up of this room.

Buy or borrow what is needed to make it comfortable and livable. Purchasing one or two special things is fine, but your goal is not to make this your child's fantasy room to compensate for the divorce or separation, or to try to convince him or her it would be better to live with you.

Encourage your child to really live in your home -- by using the TV, the stereo, the dishwasher, the shower, having friends over, and so forth. Expect your child to clean up his or her own messes and perform some household chores. This is an important part of really feeling ownership of a space.

Refer to the home as "our home," not as "my home." Your home will always be your child's home -- even if he or she isn't there all the time.

- **Finding New Things to Do**

Visitation is your big chance to expand your child's horizons. Have you always wanted to take your child kite-flying? Do you think your child might be interested in starting a collection of some kind? Try new things a little at a time and see how you both like them. You can do things that you never would have been able to do with the other parent along. Don't be afraid to give new things a chance. Give both you and your child

permission to experiment and try new things together.

● **Going Out**

Just as you when you lived under the same roof, sometimes you will want to go out with your child. Plan things that will both enjoy, but remember not to overplan. Get input from your child about where he or she would like to choose age-appropriate activities. Be sure to include visits to your family; children need to remain connected to extended families. If you have your child with you for a weekend, one event or big outing is plenty. Continue to do errands and outings as needed. Simply riding in the car together is a great opportunity to talk and be together.

● **Ideas for Visitation Activities**

It can be hard to decide what you should do together during visitation. Remember that your child may have activities such as sports practice or a friend's birthday party scheduled during your time; make sure you plan around these.

You will probably find that as you have more time alone with your child, you will find more and more things to do and you will be willing to try things that you never would have when you lived together. Remember to be open to things you are not comfortable with the thought of a certain activity or outing, then just don't plan it. If you are simply going to the water, then it is silly to plan to take your child fishing. Your child loves you for who you are, not for the things you do.

Try some of these ideas for things to do together:

- Play cards or a board game
- Do a word or jigsaw puzzle
- Build a model from a kit
- Paint or draw
- Take a walk
- Rent a movie
- Play a computer or video game
- Make a snowman
- Make a scrapbook of your time together
- Cook something together
- Do a craft project together
- Toss a ball around outside
- Draw your dream houses
- Make up a story together
- Brush the dog
- Do yoga, tai kwan do, or other exercises
- Wash the dishes or clean the house
- Dance
- Read aloud to each other
- Invite family members over
- Plan a party or vacation
- Plant a garden
- Go for a bike ride
- Do car repairs together
- Watch birds
- Design a family crest
- Paint the child's room
- Use a telescope
- Tell your child stories about him/ herself
- Play hide-and-go-seek
- Talk about what's happening at school or in the news
- Do homework (you do some of your work while your child does schoolwork, or assist your child when needed)
- Watch TV and talk about what you are watching
- Start a stamp collection
- Paint a room
- Research your family history or genealogy or meanings of your names
- Go to the park
- Go to the library
- Go to a pottery shop
- Go to a movie
- Do volunteer work together
- Watch a sporting event
- Get your hair cut together
- Go to an amusement park
- Visit friends or relatives
- Go to a museum
- Go kite-flying
- Walk around city hall
- Ride a bus or the subway
- Go camping, even if for an afternoon
- Pick flowers or collect rocks
- Go to the zoo
- Take a nature walk
- Take a class together (such as art, karate, dance, horseback riding, etc.)
- Go hiking, skiing, sledding, skating, bike-riding, rollerblading, or canoeing
- Attend local puppet shows and children's performances
- Attend story-time at a library or bookstore
- Browse around a book or music store
- Hang out with friends who have kids the same age
- Go on a picnic
- Go grocery shopping for a meal you plan to eat together
- Attend a concert

- Research bugs

- **Vacations**

Your parenting plan may include a long period of time each year for you and your child to vacation together. That you do not have to actually go anywhere during this time. Staying at home is absolutely fine. You should try to arrange your schedule so you can spend a large portion of this time with your child. If you do decide to go somewhere, give the other parent a phone number where you can be reached, as well as the dates you will be away. It is important to involve your child in planning the trip. Give your child the opportunity to call the other parent while you are away. This is the first time your young child has been away from the other parent for an extended period of time, expect some separation anxiety. Deal with it by being loving, tolerant, allowing contact with the other parent by phone and by simply using distraction.

You may feel nervous or apprehensive about spending a long period of time alone with your child. It may be a difficult adjustment, but you and your child really will be fine together. Try not to have high expectations, and be patient.

- **Interference With Visitation**

Unfortunately, there are some custodial parents who try to sabotage or interfere with visitation. If you suspect a situation, first try to take a hard look at what is happening. Are you misinterpreting things? Are you being overreactive? If your ex is truly doing things that interfere with your visitation, try to talk to him or her calmly. Explain how visitation is to your child and how all children need two parents. Explain that you are not trying to interfere with the other parent's life, make things difficult, or hurt anyone's feelings by exercising your visitation rights. You just love your child and want to spend time with him or her. It has nothing to do with your relationship with the other parent. Talk about the problems you are experiencing. Maybe a schedule change would help things.

If none of this helps, and the other parent continues to deny you visitation at your scheduled times or is consistently getting the child to you for visitation, you need to speak to your lawyer.

Advice for the Custodial Parent

You may feel that, in many ways, your hard work is done. You take the time to make sure you have a good relationship with your child, and anything the other parent does or doesn't do isn't your problem.

Actually, this really isn't the case. You need to encourage visitation and your child's relationship with the other parent. Be sure that your child is able to handle it and get the benefits from it.

If you feel your ex-spouse is not the greatest parent, it is even more important that you support and encourage visitation or she may not be completely on top of it. Part of your responsibility as a custodial parent is making sure that your child has a continued relationship with his/her other parent.

- **Talking to Your Child About Visitation**

The one thing to remember when communicating with your child, verbally and non-verbally, is that you must be positive and encouraging about the time he or she spends with the other parent. Your actions convey as much information as your words. If you slam the door when the other parent leaves, speak to him or her in a hostile voice, or allow your child to hear language to convey your anger, this information will get through to your child and inform him or her that you're angry or she wasn't spending time with the other parent. This is hurtful and confusing to children and teens alike.

Sometimes, children act as if they don't want to go with the other parent; your job is to make sure they go. Sometimes, children act as if they can't wait to get away from you; your job is not to show any resentment or anger. You are, of course, going to have emotional reactions to these two situations. The key is not to show them your child if possible.

- **Your Responsibility for Visitation**

When the court gave you custody of your child, the judge also gave you the responsibility for making sure your child continued to have the other parent in his or her life. In fact, if you interfere with or try to avoid visitation, this can be a basis for a change of custody. You have a responsibility to make sure that visitation is a priority in your child's life. Schedule your child for a regular activity on the other parent's day without discussing it with your ex or making arrangements can be made. Make sure you emphasize to your child that visitation must be given priority in his or her life.

- **When Your Child Doesn't Want to Go**

Most children reach a point where one day they say that they do not want to go on visitation. Visitation is not optional for your child, just as it is not optional for you. Spending time with one's parents is a lifelong commitment. When your children are adults, they can decide for themselves if they wish to continue their relationships with their parents. While they are children, they don't have this choice. You are the parent and you must make sure that your child follows the rules that have been created for your family. Furthermore, you have been ordered by the court to allow visitation at scheduled times. If you do not, you are violating a court order and can be held in contempt of court, which can mean jail time and fines, not to mention the fact that you could lose custody.

If your child refuses to go, you are responsible for making sure he or she goes. Use the discipline techniques that are effective with your child (note: physical punishment is never an effective discipline technique): take away privileges, take away cherished items, and so on.

You and your ex must present a united front on this matter. You must both act as if the scheduled time is going to happen and you must not give in. If you give in and allow your child to stay home with you once, it becomes clear to the child that he can play one of you off the other, that you don't mean what you say, and that you're not serious about how important time with the other parent is.

If you think that you "win" by keeping your child home, you're mistaken. You're effectively denying your child his or her right to have two parents that love and care for him or her -- through good times and bad times.

- **When Your Child Would Rather Be There**

There will be times when he or she will not want to come home or will make noise about preferring to be with his/her other parent. All of this is normal, and it is something you just have to get through. Again, you have to stick to your guns and to your schedule. Children don't get to choose where they live and which parent they would rather be with. You and the other parent must make sure your child understands that you both will always listen to what he or she has to say, but that the parents are the ones who make the decisions about living arrangements.

All that being said, there are circumstances where a change of custody would be the best thing for a child. It is common for teens to have a real need to spend more time with the parent of the same sex. Should it become clear that your child truly wants and needs to live with the other parent, you may need to re-think your arrangements. Talk with a family therapist or counselor to work out what would be best for your child.

- **Helping Your Child With Long-Distance Visitation**

If the other parent lives far away, you need to develop some strategies for helping your child cope with long-distance visitation. Even though your child is physically separated from the other parent, this doesn't mean they have to be out of touch or emotionally separated. Encourage your child and the other parent to share regular phone calls. If the other parent can't handle the expense, maybe you could share the cost. You can also encourage people to give your child phone call gift cards.

Encourage them to send each other letters and packages. Set up an e-mail account for your child, or use an online instant messenger program so that the child and other parent can communicate quickly and easily. They can send each other faxes, post things on a private website, or see each other via web cams. There are also computer games you can buy, such as "JumpStart Baby" (from The Learning Company), that allow the child and other parent to play a computer game together over the Internet. Take photos your child can send to the other parent. Send copies of report cards and videotapes of recitals.

When the other parent and your child do see each other in person, it will need to be in bigger chunks of time than the typical visitation schedule. If your child is very young, it makes more sense for the other parent to come to your area so that the child can continue to have time with both parents. As a child grows, he or she will be able to visit the other parent out of town. Think about how you will arrange transportation. Perhaps one of you could drive the child there and the other parent could drive the child home. Some parents are comfortable allowing their children to fly alone, and airlines can make accommodations for this so that an employee will escort the child.

While your child is away with the other parent, make sure that you have frequent telephone and/or e-mail contact so that the child knows you are still accessible to him or her.

- **Coping With All That "Stuff"**

One of the main things parents argue about is their child's belongings. "You didn't send any clean underwear," "How could you forget to bring his soccer uniform back?" or "What do you mean you can't find

the pacifier?" Dealing with your child's "stuff" is one of the biggest difficulties you may have to cope with.

It is a good idea to set some ground rules about the belongings. There are some items that will need to travel with the child, such as school books, instruments, sports equipment, special toys or blankies, coats and shoes. It is best if the other parent is encouraged to provide some items that can stay at his or her home. He or she can purchase some clothes, toys, books, and so on to keep at his or her home, or maybe there are some items you are willing to send from your home that can stay at the other home. This will reduce the amount of items being exchanged.

Laundry is a heated point of contention with some parents. The best policy is to return the clothes that belong at the other house laundered. Older children can take on this responsibility themselves.

Develop a system for making sure the right items go with your child on visitation. It may be helpful to post a list on your refrigerator or bulletin board so that nothing is forgotten while packing. In the beginning, you will need to assist with packing. It will take a while for your child to get into the swing of this. Children over age eight should be encouraged to start to manage their belongings themselves.

If your child returns home and essential items are missing, you'll need to contact your ex and arrange for him/her to drop them off or for you to go pick them up. Encourage the other parent to use a list to keep track of what needs to come home. You can also send a checklist of everything you have packed if you think this will help. You may wish to use a marker chart so the list can remain permanent. You can mark items off each time in erasable marker.

- **Things to Say About Visitation**

- It is important to me that you spend time with your mom/dad.
- I want you to spend time with Mom/Dad because she/he is your other parent and that will never change.
- Yes, I'll miss you, but I'm glad you'll have some time with Mom/Dad.
- Have fun! See you when you come home.
- I'm sorry you don't feel like going, but today is your day to be with Mom/Dad.
- He/She will always be your mom/dad, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

- **Things *Not* to Say About Visitation**

- I wish I could go, too.
- Well, I guess you'll just have to miss the big family reunion at the beach since you'll be with Mom/Dad. Too bad.
- You'd rather be with him/her anyhow, so just go.
- Wouldn't you rather just stay here with me and rent a movie?
- I'm so nervous when you're alone with him/her.
- I don't know why you want to go with him/her.

- **Easing Transitions**

For most children, the transition from one parent to another is the most difficult part of visitation. To make transitions easier when you pick up your child, you should talk about what you have planned and what you will be doing that day. When you are dropping off your child, talk about what he or she will be doing with the other parent and when he or she will see you next. Transitions are hard with older kids and teens as well; they may close up or become shy.

To ease the transition at the end of your time together, tell the child in advance when the time will be up and give some additional reminders, such as two hours before, one hour before, and half an hour before. When you part, make sure to point to the next time you will be together and make some reference to what you will be doing together then. Also point out if you will have phone or e-mail contact before then. This emphasizes the ongoing nature of your relationship and provides a viable link to your next time together. Here are some ways to ease transitions:

- Transition in a public place or at a relative's home.
- Use the beginning or ending of school as a transition time so the child does not go directly from one parent to the other.
- Don't shoehorn your child from one parent's car to the other's. Spend a few minutes somewhere before popping him or her back in a car.
- Give him or her some space to adjust. Allow some quiet individual time before getting into an activity together.

- Keep your thoughts or complaints about the other parent under wraps. Don't use transition time to have a discussion.
- Be polite and friendly to the other parent. Smile!
- Try not to rush. Being frantic just makes things worse.
- Make it clear you're happy to see your child when your time together begins.

This article has been edited and excerpted from The Visitation Handbook for the Custodial and Non-Custodial Parent: Your Complete Guide to Parenting Apart by Brette McWhorter Sember. This book is actually two books in one: one side for each separated/divorced parent who must now figure out how to share their children. The two parts address the unique concerns, situations, emotions, and practical problems faced by the custodial and the non-custodial parent. Written by a divorce attorney, this book is filled with practical advice from her own experience with families facing the challenges of shared parenting.