

## ***PARENTING TIME TIPS***

Separation and divorce impose tough tasks on all family members, including the children. Children feel as though they are the powerless losers, deprived of the full-time proper guidance of their two parents.

Although there might be some bitterness between you and your spouse, it should not be inflicted on your children. In every child's mind there should be an image of two loving parents. To foster this image, you should remember that parenting time is a time for the parent and the children to be with each other, to enjoy each other, to maintain positive relationships.

### **THE CUSTODIAL PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

Custodial parents should prepare children positively for the continued relationship with the other parent by themselves speaking respectfully of the other parent and encouraging the children to have and express their positive feelings for that parent. Making it clear to the children that your separation and divorce does not mean that the children have to take sides or stifle their love for the other parent—even if that parent has hurt you personally—will go a long way toward allowing the children the freedom to get on with the usual tasks of growing up, secure in their parents' love. If children hear and see cooperation between their parents, at least as it concerns them, they will relax about this separation being their fault.

Children should be ready to go at the designated time, dressed appropriately for the weather and having with them any necessary clothing changes, equipment, books, etc. It is good training in responsibility to have children assist with the packing of their things.

Events that will disrupt a visit should be communicated to the other parent as soon as you are aware of them. Remember that the other parent might be just as able to take the child to the Scout meeting or dance recital. Avoid scheduling activities for the children at times they customarily spend with the other parent unless he or she specifically consents. Do not discuss with the children enticing opportunities that conflict with scheduled parenting times unless the other parent first consents to a change.

### **THE VISITING PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

Having other people present during parenting time can dilute the parent-child experience, and it might appear to the children that you do not have the time or interest in them that allows you to give them your undivided attention during parenting time.

Visits to grandparents are almost certainly okay but should not become the norm for all parenting time and should not be an excuse for you to disappear. Furthermore, if your parents are displeased with the divorce and angry with your ex-spouse, it is your responsibility to request

that they keep their views to themselves in the presence of the children.

You might be concerned about what to do with or where to take your children during your parenting time, particularly if they are very young. Planned amusements can add to the pleasure of your time together, but most important of all is your involvement with the children. Avoid boredom (yours and the children's) by finding out what interests the children have and giving of yourself. This might be getting down on the floor with stacking toys, reading the same story repeatedly to a toddler, making up stories or a batch of cookies, supervising homework or working on a science fair project together, teaching a child to ride a bike or throw a ball or program a computer, gardening, or playing chess. Material things and holiday-type outings cannot compare with the steady influence such "real life" parenting provides. This divorce provides you with an opportunity to establish your own traditions for bedtimes, Saturday mornings, holidays, etc.

This is not to say that an occasional special trip, outing, or present is inappropriate. Rather, you should avoid having a feverish round of tiring activity or plying a child with expensive gifts each parenting time. This can be interpreted by the children or your former spouse as a shallow and counterproductive effort to purchase the children's affection or sympathy.

Following a few suggestions listed below can improve your chances of having your contacts with your children be helpful to you and to them:

1. Do not use parenting time as an opportunity to grill the children about the other parent's activities or visitors. Make it gently clear that you respect the other parent's privacy and expect the children to respect yours, that what is going on between Mom and Dad is grown-ups' business that need not further affect the children. In the children's eyes, the parents might seem to hate one another, and if a child does something to please one parent, he or she might fear that the other parent might reject him or her. He or she might feel that he or she has already lost one parent and does not want to lose another. These intense feelings of discomfort take time and diligence to dispel, once present. Your best remedy is to project mutual respect for each other and to make the visit as pleasant as possible.
2. Do not discuss with the children what you believe to be the other parent's shortcomings or faults.
3. If the children ask questions about why you and their other parent broke up, give a succinct answer appropriate to the children's ages. Your answer should not try to prove the other parent was to blame, nor should you bare your soul to the children if you have hurt their other parent. Let them know that you are not going to be able to get back together, but assure them that you will carry on as their parents.

4. Do not arrange parenting time at unreasonable hours.
5. Arrive and remain sober for parenting times. If you cannot face an overnight or weekend without drinking, seek treatment and forgo longer periods of time together until you feel you can control your dependency.
6. Do not fail to notify the other parent as soon as possible if you are unable to keep your parenting time. It is unfair to keep the children waiting. It is terribly disappointing to children to be ready and not be picked up at all. If this happens repeatedly, they begin to protect their feelings by locking you out of their hearts. In addition, the other parent might have planned her or his time around the time the children were to be with you.
7. Do not make extravagant promises to the children that will be difficult to keep or that you know you cannot or will not keep.
8. If one parent has plans for the children that conflict with the parenting time, you have the right to say no. Still, if the plans are in the best interests of the children and not interposed too frequently, be adults and work out the problem together.
9. Always work for the emotional well-being, health, happiness, and safety of the children.
10. The children might feel sad or mad or withdrawn at the start of or following parenting time. Again, both parents should make every effort to discuss openly the children's anxieties about separating from each of you in turn and what to do about them.
11. Both parents should strive to agree on general discipline standards and on specific discipline issues so that one parent is not undermining the reasonable efforts of the other.