

## Summer Visitation: Make the Transition Smooth

By Kris Jenkins, Human Environmental Sciences Specialist

School will soon be out and there are many choices that divorced parents must make in regards to summer vacation and visitation. While some of this is set out in the parenting plan, every decree is different. Reading yours will tell you how long summer visitation should be, if child support is discontinued, who is responsible for transportation, and in most cases even sets the hours that the child will come home. Some parenting plans are not this specific, and even those that are can be adjusted by mutual agreement if it benefits your child. Keeping flexible is usually what works best. In trying to decide whether to have children spend one long period of time in the summer with the non custodial parent or several short ones, keep in mind the ages of the children, and how long they can be gone from the parent they live with, as well as the other parent's ability to take good care of them. Many children spend a month or six weeks with the other parent. Some children spend longer, especially if the parents live a long distance away.



It's important to remember that what works well for one family may be a total disaster for another. Sometimes, especially as your children get older, the plan doesn't work, or is very difficult to accommodate--so be prepared to renegotiate.

### Remember these key points:

- ◆ Children have a right to spend time with both parents
- ◆ Children should be encouraged to enjoy the time they spend with the non-custodial parent. They don't need guilt trips.
- ◆ Children have a right to love both parents.

All family members have fears and concerns about the upcoming visitation.

- ◆ **Custodial parents** will worry about the health and safety of the children and how they will adjust to a different environment. Try and focus on the positive benefits for all of you.
- ◆ **Children** worry about how they will spend their time; what they will do without their friends; how they will get along with step or half siblings and what kind of relationship they will have with their other parent. Children often do not verbalize their worries or are not old enough to express them, but that does not mean that they do not have them.
- ◆ **Non-custodial parents** have concerns about how to spend time with the children, how to manage chores, responsibilities and work, and also if their child will like and love them. Non-custodial parents also worry about how the children will blend with their new family members.

## Focus on Kids Contacts

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## Tips to Ease the Summer Transition

- ◆ **Planning.** Plans for summer vacation should be made well in advance. All necessary plans such as time, duration, travel, rules, curfews, diet, medicines, etc. should be handled by the parents either by phone, in person and if necessary in writing. Actual activities that are planned during the visit should be discussed with the children if they are old enough. Day camps, swimming lessons, sports camps, where you might go on vacation and other things that interest the children should be considered. Having children take part in the planning gives them something to look forward to and helps make them feel important.
- ◆ **Preparation.** Both parents can do a great deal to prepare children for the summer. The custodial parent has great input into the attitude of the children about the visit, and the non-custodial parent can smooth the way by regularly keeping in touch with the child during the school year.

## Consider Your Parental Role

### Custodial Parents:

- ◆ **Focus on the positive aspects of the visit.** Children take their cues from you. If you have a positive, encouraging attitude as they go to spend some important time with the other parent, things will go smoother. Let your children know that although you'll miss them a lot, you are glad they'll have this special time with the other parent.
- ◆ **Be Cooperative.** Try to be civil and polite with the other parent. Negative remarks or comments about the other parent affect the children's self-esteem and can make it difficult for them to look forward to being with that parent. Give your children permission to have fun, have new experiences, and to love the other parent.
- ◆ **Have kids well rested and ready to go.** Transition for children is very difficult without sending them off tired and grumpy. Prepare them physically as well as mentally.



### Non-custodial parents

- ◆ **Keep in Close Communication.** A summer visit has little chance of being successful if the non-custodial parent and the children know little or nothing about each other. It's vitally important that there is regular and meaningful communication with the children during the school year. Frequent phone conversation, visits, emails, writing letters, making a video of family life, audio tapes, cards, etc. are all ways of keeping in touch with your children and laying the groundwork for a summer visit.
- ◆ **Transition is rough.** Accept that kids need a transition time of several days to a week. Children are also likely to be homesick and have some anxiety about leaving the other parent. Young children will cling, and maybe be fussy. Older children may be surly, defiant or withdrawn. Give it a little time and then sit down with them and discuss their behaviors.
- ◆ **Allow easy access to the other parent.** Set up frequent, scheduled phone calls. Make email accessible. Let your child know they can call their other parent at any time.
- ◆ **Discuss your work obligations with the children.** No one can be with their children all the time, so explain how that schedule is going to work. Try to find individual time for each child, each day. This doesn't have to be a huge block of time—it could be reading a book, playing a game, taking a walk, going swimming, or just snuggling and spending time together. Children need individual attention from their parents. It makes them feel special, protected and loved.