

Long-Distance Parenting

A Co-Parenting Guide for Divorced and Separated Parents

After separation or divorce, co-parenting can be difficult for families trying to work out issues such as finances, legal custody, scheduling, communication and so on. The challenges of co-parenting are compounded by distance. Parents relocate for any number of reasons, such as for work, to be close to extended family or for a new romantic partner. Whatever the reason for the move, parents must understand that relocation might have negative consequences for their children. They must be willing to work together to make decisions for the benefit of their children.

Develop a long-distance parenting plan

There are several aspects of parenting to keep in mind when developing and implementing a long-distance parenting plan.

Use a means of communication that both parents are comfortable with and discuss what information to share about the children and how to do so.

Determine how much authority each parent has over the children in each home. Try to keep rules consistent across households to avoid confusing children about what they can and cannot do in each home. Noncustodial, long-distance parents should exercise their parental authority despite the temptation to be more of a playmate. Children need structure in addition to feeling loved and having fun.

Create a parenting schedule for spending time with children. Place calendars in both homes that include details of where children will be each week.

Consider travel arrangements between communities, including costs of travel, frequency of travel, and pickup and drop-off times. Being on time is important because it reaffirms to children that they can count on their parents.

Think about opportunities for the long-distance parent to stay involved in their children's lives and decide how to handle holidays, vacations, birthdays and other special

FOCUS on Kids

This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children. We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.

occasions. Some parents trade off holidays, whereas others choose to have children spend certain special days with the same parent each year.

Look into support services, such as counseling, co-parent education and co-parenting websites, for guidance when developing a parenting plan that addresses the family's specific needs. Update and revise the parenting plan as necessary. Discuss benefits and problems of each family

member's proposed updates to the parenting plan.

Communication between co-parents

To promote an effective co-parenting arrangement, parents should agree on a means of communication that works for both of them. The following tips might help co-parents communicate:

- Use ex-etiquette communication. Discuss co-parenting details in a calm, friendly and pleasant manner. Listen patiently when the other parent is speaking. Demonstrate your understanding and respect for their opinions and suggestions.
- Watch what you say to each other and in front of the children. Do not put children in the middle of co-parenting arguments and discussions because that causes children distress.
- Stick to factual information concerning the children. Welcome the other parent's opinions and suggestions and express appreciation for their contributions to parenting decisions and for taking interest in their children's lives.
- Discuss child care providers, schools, extracurricular activities, camps and health care with the other parent and exchange report cards, drawings, photos and other items.
- Keep discussions focused on co-parenting. For example, instead of, "I've decided to send our children to the Creative Expressions' child care center. Do you agree?" parents might find it more helpful to say, "I've made a list of potential child care programs we might look into for our children. Here is their contact information. Have you come across any child care programs you think would also be good options? I'll get back to you when I find out more about these listed programs."

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Age-appropriate co-parenting tips

When one parent lives away from their children, time spent together can be disappointing and upsetting because the parent is no longer involved in raising the children on a daily basis. They might not know how to attend to their children's needs, which can be harmful to the relationship. The custodial parent should encourage their children and the other parent to stay in touch between visits, which helps them maintain their relationship when they are apart. Developing age-appropriate parenting plans for long-distance parenting involves several considerations.

Infants

Parenting from a distance is especially difficult with children at this age. Infants develop attachments to adult caregivers, so both parents should have consistent one-on-one contact and stick to regular routines if possible. Maintaining relationships is easier when the noncustodial parent lives within an hour away, but that is not always possible. These tips are intended to help long-distance parents of infants:

- Engage in all aspects of care during visits, such as soothing, bathing, playing and feeding. Keep blankets, diapers, bottles, pacifiers and favorite toys for the infant at each residence.
- In between visits, videoconference with the infant and other parent so the infant can see the absent parent's face and hear their voice.
- Rather than send gifts or toys by mail, giving them in person is often more meaningful. At this age, infants do not understand whom the gift came from unless it is given to them in person.

Toddlers

Like infants, toddlers can make it difficult to develop an effective long-distance parenting plan. Children of this age need consistent contact and routines to build strong bonds with both parents. Toddlers must spend time with both parents each week for these relationships to be comfortable and familiar.

As with infants, engage in all aspects of caring for toddlers during visits, such as soothing them when they get upset, bathing them, playing with them and feeding them. Keep their favorite toys at each residence.

Between visits, stay in touch via telephone or videoconference to maintain regular contact. Telephone conversations are not the best way for toddlers to connect a face with a voice, but they help.

While apart from your toddler, engage in these distance activities:

- Send them a video of the noncustodial parent reading a bedtime story and include the storybook so they can follow along.
- Create stickers of your children's names and place them over the main character's name in the children's favorite books. You can do the same thing with pictures of your children's face covering the main character's face.

- Send a get-well package when your children are sick and fill it with items they might need, such as a can of soup, a special blanket, a video wishing them a quick recovery and a favorite stuffed animal.

Preschool and early elementary school

Children in preschool and early elementary school can handle longer separations from noncustodial parents. However, avoid letting too much time pass between visits because children need time to reconnect with their parents in meaningful ways.

During visits, reassure children that neither the divorce nor the distance is their fault and tell them about plans to stay in contact. The noncustodial parent might also tell their child how happy they are to have them spend time with the other parent, which helps ease feelings of guilt children might have for leaving.

Communicate over the phone between visits and engage in distance activities while you're away, such as:

- Send the other parent a package of treats to hide for your children in predetermined areas of the home to play hide-and-seek. In a letter or over the phone, provide clues to where they can find the hidden treats.
- Have flowers, pizza or balloons delivered to your children on the day of a special event, such as a play, recital or sports match. Include a personal letter or note expressing how proud you are of them.
- Send a package with cookie cutters, nonperishable ingredients and a recipe for your children's favorite cookie.
- Look for fun, personalized items on which to write letters and notes to your children. For example, choose pictures of things they like, their favorite color of paper, an item of the parent's that they like or pictures of you together. Consider cutting these personalized items into fun shapes.
- Play games together online, such as car racing, crossword puzzles, card games, golf, chess or checkers.

Preteens and adolescents

Maintaining contact and a strong bond with children is easier at this age. Parents should stay up-to-date with teens' activities in and out of school. Noncustodial parents might need to be more flexible with visitation schedules, because teens have more demanding schedules, more responsibilities and growing friend networks. For example, teenagers might not want to leave their community to visit the other parent if it means missing a school dance or night out with friends. A desire to spend more time with friends and less time with family is normal for teens.

There are several ways to keep in touch between visits to catch up on their friends, school, sports and other areas of their life. Engage in age-appropriate distance activities, such as having gifts delivered for special events, sending a get-well-soon care package if they fall ill or playing online games together.

Importance of continuous involvement

After the divorce, one or both parents might find a new partner, which makes long-distance parenting arrangements more challenging. For example, if the custodial parent becomes romantically involved with another partner, the long-distance parent might feel jealous, replaced, left out, unneeded and unimportant to their children's lives.

Whatever the situation, the noncustodial parent must not give up and should try to stay in regular contact with their children. With a long-distance parenting plan in place, the noncustodial parent needs to remain interested and involved in their children's lives. They might find it helpful to know the names and contact information of teachers, coaches, doctors and other adults who frequently interact with the children. Speaking with their children on a regular basis allows parents to help their children with homework and projects, as well as express interest in their children's activities. The long-distance parent might also need to be creative in coming up with other ways to maintain contact. Equally important is the custodial parent's support of this continuous involvement to help ease the transition into new family arrangements.

Holidays, vacations and special occasions

Holidays, vacations and special occasions can be challenging for divorced families. Distance between households can make these occasions even more difficult for children.

Holiday celebrations, vacations and other special occasions are how children learn family, religious and cultural traditions, connect with their heritage, and build strong relationships with extended family. Although these events can be stressful for parents, they are usually a happy time for children and families to celebrate being together.

Some long-distance, noncustodial parents rarely get to spend these times with their children. Distance, scheduling conflicts or the other parent might prevent the noncustodial parent from seeing their children on holidays or taking them on vacations. This can be especially hard for the long-distance parent if they harbor feelings of guilt or sadness because they cannot be with their children.

Long-distance, divorced families should consider how to handle special events. Parents should discuss how to both stay regularly connected with their children during special occasions. Trading off holidays throughout the year sometimes does not allow children to experience consistent traditions of preparing for and celebrating certain holidays or birthdays. They might not be able to enjoy the same foods, activities and people, which further diminishes for children how familiar and meaningful such occasions are. There are several ways you might consider to ensure both parents are included during holidays and special occasions:

- Divide specific holidays, birthdays and other special occasions between parents. For example, children might spend Christmas every year with their mother

and her family, then spend Easter with their father and his family. This approach provides consistency for children.

- Be specific in determining how long children stay at each residence.
- Focus on the children's time spent with the long-distance parent and not on missing them when they are with the other parent. The long-distance parent's time with their children should be embraced and celebrated.

Absent noncustodial parents

In some situations, a long-distance parent might be intentionally absent from their children's lives. Such a situation might be due to feeling rejected by their children, having a limited role in their lives or viewing the process of picking up and returning children to the other parent to be an emotional hassle.

No matter the reason, absence can create difficulties within the family, especially for communication between co-parents and children. Despite such issues, the custodial parent should still follow the parenting plan and support communication between children and the noncustodial parent.

Communication between adults

Even if the noncustodial parent chooses to be uninvolved in their children's lives, the custodial parent should still try to keep up communication. It might be difficult, but the custodial parent should be friendly and sensitive when keeping lines of communication open. For example, separation and divorce are emotional times for all involved, and parents might say harsh things during conflicts. When encouraging communication, the custodial parent needs to understand that how they say things can upset the other parent or make them feel excluded from the children's lives.

Ex-etiquette communication is the best approach for co-parents when discussing information about the children because it encourages parents to be friendly and courteous to each other. Including the noncustodial parent in every aspect of decision-making that involves the children can help them feel needed and included in situations affecting their children.

Another significant reason to stay in touch is that the noncustodial parent might suddenly re-enter their children's lives after years of no contact. The noncustodial parent might have a new or renewed desire to be involved with their children. Maintaining a positive, ongoing connection with the noncustodial parent can help them maintain a strong relationship and continued involvement in their children's lives.

Communication between custodial parents and children

A long-distance, noncustodial parent's absence is usually obvious to children, so the custodial parent needs to know what to tell them. They might have questions about why

the parent left and does not want to be in their lives. At a young age, children might feel responsible for the other parent's absence and blame themselves. Older children and adolescents might make their own assumptions about their noncustodial parent's absence.

These are unhealthy reactions that can have potential long-term consequences. The custodial parent needs to be honest with their children without getting into too much personal detail or making things up. Rather, reassure children that they still have one parent who is not going to leave them. Focus on what children have instead of what they have lost. Consider these helpful tips for communicating with your children in a positive way:

- Show children empathy and compassion, listen to them and confirm what they are saying, such as by saying, "So what you are saying is..."
- Provide them with extra attention and commitment during the divorce process and transition to a new location.
- Talk positively about the other parent.
- Reassure children that you will try to maintain contact with the other parent.

Conclusion

Co-parents need to remember that the focus should be on what is best for their children. Figuring out a co-parenting system that works for both parents requires sacrifice, time, effort and understanding to figure out a system that works for both parents.

Additional information

These resources might be helpful when developing a parenting plan.

- <http://www.divorcehelpforparents.com/long-distance-parenting.html>
- <http://www.fambooks.com/moms.htm>
- <http://www.fambooks.com/daads.htm>
- <http://www.ourfamilywizard.com>
- <http://www.divorce-education.com>

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