

Part I

Many divorced fathers are faced with the reality of visitation- an often negotiated, mediated and all too brief time they are able to spend with their children. In many cases, visitation is very limited, compared to the relationship dads used to be able to enjoy, so it's absolutely crucial that dads make this visitation time the best possible experience for their children and themselves. Here are a few ideas for making the most of your visitation:

Give it time

There's an old saying that time can heal all wounds. But time is only half of the equation. Healing old wounds also takes a commitment to getting better. Soccer players who've torn a ligament just don't give up. They gradually work themselves back into top playing form, even if their leg will remain tender and sore for years.

No "Mr. Mom"

Your first visitation may be the first time you've ever been alone and bearing full responsibility for taking care of your kids all by yourself for an extended period of time. Or, you may be an old pro at taking care of your kids by yourself. In either case, never try to be a mom. You'll only set yourself up for failure because men are not moms, men are dads. First, your children expect you to be fatherly. Do the things you always did. If you were a husband who cooked, continue to cook. If you didn't cook, don't try to "show-off" for your kids by attempting to whip-up some gourmet meal. Rather, be honest with your kids, and invite them to learn with you, on whatever you're attempting. Let them into your life. Invite them to sit next to you and read with or to them that article on bass fishing. Look for ways you can include them in your life and ways you can continue to be involved in theirs. Second, you just won't feel quite right. Trying to be something (a mom) that you're not is like trying to wear your shoes on the wrong feet. You may be able to do it for a little while, but it is awkward.

Avoid conflict

Research tells us that if you can reduce conflict, your transitions should be smoother. But if your marriage ended with an unresolved war, you will most likely need to work harder to make the transition for you and your kids smoother. Men who have most successfully negotiated a bitter divorce or custody battle remember that any unresolved conflict they feel about their former family life rests with their ex-wife, not their kids. And they never openly battled or degraded their former wife in front of their children. Remember that she's still their mom, even though she's no longer your wife. Being aware that you still harbor negative emotions toward your former spouse can help you avoid directing them toward your children when it's "your weekend." Awareness can also help you put your hurt and anger behind you. Mentally practice and prepare for visitation. Make a game plan for how you will handle picking up and sending off your child(ren). Be sure you know where and at what time you're to be there; it'll be easier for you and your kids.

Avoid over-scheduling

Visitation may seem very daunting. "How am I going to keep them entertained?" many fathers wonder. Stop and ask yourself if you worried about this when you were married? Probably not. Why? Because it was OK just to be in each other's presence. It was OK just to watch television together. It was OK not to have to talk. It's still the same. Even though you may have a hundred and one things you want to talk with your child about (or maybe not) doesn't mean they want to. They may need time to themselves for a while, just to be, rather than to be doing. Talk with your kids about the types of activities they would like to do. Ask them how they would like to spend their time with you. Be open and honest about your likes and dislikes. Over time, you'll establish a natural rhythm that will transform what seems to you as "fathering by appointment" into wonderful memories and strong bonds with your child(ren).

Part II

Be flexible

Even though the agreement mediated by the courts may give you visitation every-other weekend and every-other holiday, there's no reason you and your former spouse can't vary that arrangement by mutual agreement among all of you, kids included. There may be times when your kids are invited to a slumber

party or they're going to a camp. Or, you can't get any other dates off work. Being rigid to spite your former spouse only hurts your kids.

Don't push

Accept the fact that your child(ren) are living in two separate households. Going from one home to the other causes children to feel the emotional equivalent to jet lag. Kids need time to get reacquainted not only with you, but with their surroundings. Avoid making it harder for them to adjust by imposing a radically different set of rules or value system, or by making them feel bad about the different system at their mother's.

It's tough enough for kids to sort through and make personal sense of all the values and beliefs they are being taught. Your goal is to create as little confusion as possible. Be especially sensitive to entertainment, religion, holiday traditions, bedtime, curfew, and other behavioral rules. It's a delicate balance you're trying to achieve influencing rather than inflicting. You'll never go wrong if you're focused on the needs of your child.

Give them their space

Children feel more comfortable, at ease and connected when they know they have a place at each parent's home that is theirs. It can be a room, a chest, a dresser, a desk, a bookcase.... some place they can keep things that are theirs and know it will be waiting for them when they return. Put up posters that reflect some of your child's interests; furnish with mementos that have special meaning for both of you.

When they resist

There are many reasons why your child may resist visitation. They may not like the woman you're dating or are married to, or the new family you are living in. Some kids reach an age when friends, activities and other interests become important and they are no longer willing to devote as much time to you alone. You can't bribe, argue, or coerce your kids into spending time with you. You may have to wait until they can accept the changes in your life. Whatever their reasons, try to set aside your fears and insecurities. Be supportive, listening and accepting of their feelings. Make it clear that your door is always open, and there is always a place for your child in your heart and home. That's not to say it doesn't hurt when your child appears to be rejecting you, it does. But the hurt will pass and it doesn't mean you're losing your child. It's just part of the divorce you have to get through and move beyond. And you will. Remember that your relationship with your child will last a lifetime. They will think differently next year and the years after. Your understanding now will pay off for both of you in the future.

You're still a dad

It's important for every divorced dad to remember that even though he is no longer a husband, he is still a father. Even though the warm, loving, intimate relationship with your former spouse is over, your children continue to need and crave a warm, loving, and involved dad in whom they can confide. Give yourself and your children the time, space, patience, unconditional love and acceptance you and they need.