

Visitation dos and don'ts

For both parents and children, visitation is critical to maintaining a sense of connectedness both during and after a divorce. In the early stages of family restructuring and co-parenting, however, visitation is frequently a source of conflict. If former spouses want revenge, finding ways to spoil a visitation is easy. If they want to help their children through a difficult transition, they will find ways to make visitation successful. For visitation to work, both parents need to accept and acknowledge that their children have two homes -- one with their father and one with their mother. Parents need to make sure that their children are safe and comfortable in both places, even if they don't spend equal time there. Parents need to help make the transition from one home to the other smooth and calm. They also need to make sure they are being consistent in rules and discipline.

Constructive parenting goals

The following guidelines are examples of parenting goals that can help children grow into healthy, happy, whole people:

- Both parents should encourage visitation to help their children grow in positive ways.
- Children need to know it is OK to love both parents.
- In general, parents should treat each other with respect for their children's benefit.
- Each parent should respect the other's child-raising views by trying, when possible, to be consistent.

Tips for Smooth Visitations

Parents should work together to make visitation exchanges and the visitation itself a positive experience for all. Some ideas are:

- Be as flexible as possible with schedules.
- Treat your former spouse with respect.
- Help children feel safe and comfortable in both homes.
- Develop routines to give children a sense of security.
- Maintain open communication lines with your former spouse.
- Don't question your children's loyalty.
- Help make the transition from one home to the other smooth and calm.
- Discuss rules and discipline with your former spouse so you are consistent.
- Encourage visitation that includes grandparents and extended family.
- Make sure your children have their own places in your home -- even if it is just part of a room -- so they feel it is also their home.
- Help your children meet other kids in your neighborhood so they have friends at both homes.
- Try to keep a routine schedule to help prepare your children for visitation.
- Have a checklist of items such as clothing and toys that your children need to take on visitations. If the children are old enough, they can help pack.
- If it's appropriate, allow your children to bring friends along occasionally.
- Spend individual time with each of your children.

Show respect for your former spouse and concern for your children.

Continuing conflicts between parents creates tension at the time of exchange and often put the children in the middle. Putting aside past animosity makes visitation a much more rewarding experience and allows everyone to get on with their lives while maintaining good parent/child relationships.

- Be on time.
- Inform your former spouse if a new person such as a babysitter or romantic partner will be part of the visitation.
- Share changes in your address, home and work phone numbers, and job with your former spouse.
- Each parent is entitled to know where the children are during visitations. They should also know if the children are left with other people such as babysitters or friends when the other parent is not there.
- Parents should try to agree on their children's religious education, as well as who is responsible for overseeing it.
- Parents should tell each other their current addresses and home and work phone numbers.
- Both parents should realize that visitation schedules may change as children age and their needs change.

Visitation Dos

The following suggestions represent strategies parents can use to achieve parenting goals:

Be flexible about visitation schedules.

- Give the other parent advance notice of changes in your schedule.
- Remember to give the other parent your vacation schedule in advance.
- Remember that your children may have plans that could affect your visitation schedule.

Make visitation a normal part of life.

- Find activities that give you and your children an opportunity to build your relationship.
- Allow time together without planned activities just to "hang out."
- Provide a balance between fun and responsibility for your children.

Visitation Don'ts

Some parents use visitation to achieve destructive goals. These are goals based on revenge, such as one parent hurting the other or disrupting his or her life. To achieve those goals, parents may use destructive behaviors that can create a more hostile environment and seriously damage relationships. Destructive strategies can be deeply hurtful to children caught in the middle. Following are tips for avoiding destructive behavior:

Don't refuse to communicate with your former spouse.

- Don't use your children to relay divorce-related messages on issues such as child support. Those issues should be discussed by adults only.
- Don't make your children responsible for making, canceling, or changing visitation plans. Those are adult responsibilities.
- Don't use your children to spy on your former spouse.
- Don't fight with the other parent during drop-off and pickup times. Deal with important issues when your children cannot overhear.

Don't disrupt your children's relationship with their other parent.

- Don't make your children feel guilty about spending time with their other parent.
- Don't use visitation as a reward for good behavior, and don't withhold it as punishment for poor behavior.
- Don't tell your children you will feel lonely and sad if they visit their other parent.
- Don't withhold visitation to punish your former spouse for problems such as missed child support payments. Withholding visitation punishes your children, who are not guilty.
- Don't withhold visitation because you feel your former spouse doesn't deserve to see the children. Unless a parent is a genuine threat, adults and children need to see each other.
- Don't use false abuse accusations to justify withholding visitation.
- Don't let activities such as sports and hobbies interfere with the time your children spend with their other parent. Your former spouse can transport the children to those activities if needed and can sometimes participate.
- Don't pressure your children about leaving clothes or toys at their other parent's home. The children need to feel they belong in both places.
- Don't falsely claim that your children are sick to justify withholding visitation.
- Don't withhold phone calls to your children from their other parent.
- Don't put down the other parent's new romantic partner.

Don't allow your anger to affect your relationship with your children.

- Don't hurt your children by failing to show up for visitation or by being late.

Don't spoil your children to buy their loyalty and love.

- Don't let your children blackmail you by refusing to visit unless you buy them something.
- Don't try to bribe your children.
- Don't feel you need to be your children's buddy for visitations to be successful. Your children need you to be a parent.
- Don't try to fill every minute of a visit. Allow some down time for routine activities such as cooking or laundry, or quiet time just to be together.

All of these visitation don'ts undercut children's ability to develop an open and supportive relationship with both parents. One of the best ways to support children involved in a separation or divorce is to do what you can to make visitations go smoothly. Focusing on visitation dos is a first step in helping children adjust.

References:

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