

Easing Visitation for Children After Divorce

ways to smooth the transition

By Teri Brown

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of a divorce involving young children is visitation. Leaving a child is never easy, but the tangled emotions of a divorce only compound the problem. Nothing is worse than handing off a screaming toddler to a person you may feel bitterness toward.

Nancy Davis, mother of one from Tigard, Ore., remembers how difficult it was when she and her husband first separated. Their daughter would sob, clinging to her almost every time she would be dropped off. Conversely, their daughter also cried when Dad dropped her off.

"It got better once I figured out ways to smooth the transition," Davis says. "I would have her do something she was excited to show her father, such as an art project or baking some cookies or going shopping for something new. It totally changed her attitude for getting dropped off at her dad's."

Sensing Tension

Brette Sember, former family law attorney and author of *How to Parent with Your Ex* (Sourcebooks, 2005), says that tension between parents can add to the stress of the child transfer from one parent to another.

"Toddlers always pick up on parental tension," Sember says. "When parents aren't cooperative the child may act out. It's likely the child will have trouble transitioning from one home to the other."

Sember suggests that families undergoing this type of stress should see a family therapist. Family therapy is productive for divorced families, too, and can help the parents find a way to work with each other and help the child cope with the negative emotions.

"Toddlers simply don't understand the complexity of the parents' relationship and don't have the tools to sort through it," Sember says. "They interpret it in the way that makes sense to them, and which is often detrimental. Some people think that babies and toddlers don't understand what is happening when their parents divorce, or when their divorced parents fight. In fact, babies and toddlers are very attuned to their parents' emotions and know something is wrong. Because these children are often pre-verbal, they don't understand that their parents are not angry with them. They interpret the negative emotions personally and it can be very damaging."

Putting Children First

Easing the transfer trauma for a child starts with easing the tension between the parents.

"Parents who work together and approach parenting as a cooperative task raise children [who] are better



adjusted and more emotionally healthy," Sember says. "When children know that both their parents love them and are willing to parent together, they feel more secure. Mom and Dad might live in separate houses, but they are still parents together and the children are still encircled within that relationship. You can have a family that does not live in one home and is no longer connected by marriage."

This sort of outlook and cooperation eases the tension between parents and makes transferring your toddler from one household to the other much easier.

Jeffery Leving, president of the Law Offices of Jeffery Leving and a noted father's rights advocate from Chicago, Ill., says putting your child first and cooperation are key not only for your child's emotional happiness, but also in keeping both parents in the picture.

"Uncooperative parenting often leads to father absence due to gender bias in our legal system," Leving says. "Due to the fact that approximately 24 million children live absent their biological father in America, it is pretty clear there is a lot of uncooperative parenting."

Leving says that though children's specific reactions to divorce vary by age, they all suffer when parents cannot get along. Toddlers often become bewildered and cranky, likely to cling fiercely to any adult family member during divorce, while preschoolers seem to blame themselves for their parents' breakup and suffer a decline in self-image and loss of self-esteem. These problems are difficult enough for children to face without adding parental conflict to the equation.

"As a parent, you must fight to protect your child from the carnage and confusion that results when the family structure crumbles," Leving says. "In order to shield your child from the divorce and post-divorce fallout, a cooperative relationship must be established."

Putting your child's needs first and remaining cooperative with your ex is the most important thing you can do to ease the stress of transferring your child from one parent to another.

Thriving on Routine

Even if parents are cooperative, visitation can be difficult for toddlers who love structure. Naps, mealtimes, daycare and bath time routines all work to create a content toddler. Visitation often messes with their routines, making a toddler cranky and uncooperative. It's important that a routine be established in each home that mirrors the routine in the other home. (This is where parental cooperation comes in!)

Toddlers also love to be told what they are going to be doing next. Use this to ease transfer tension for your child. Remind your child several times that they are going to visit Daddy soon. Create a packing routine, remembering to pack any artwork or special toys he might want to show the other parent. Creating an atmosphere of excitement helps your toddler look forward to visiting the other parent.

Transferring a toddler from one home to another doesn't have to be an exercise in frustration. If the parents are cooperative and handle the transfer as a matter of routine, it will be much easier on the child involved.

5 Tips to Help Ease Visitation Issues for Toddlers

Brette Sember gives the following tips for helping to make visitation transfers easier:

1. The first rule is don't fight, argue or have difficult discussions in front of or in earshot of your child. He or she is going to hear or pick up on it.
2. Create rules for custodial transitions (when you are exchanging your child). Decide in advance how it is going to go. Is Dad going to come in the house or wait on the porch? Have specific times. Have a specific routine during transition – always kiss your child goodbye and say "I'll see you tomorrow," for example.

3. If you can't transition peacefully, don't have face-to-face interaction. Ask Grandma to come and hand the child over while you wait in the bedroom, for example. Using a buffer like this can ease tension for everyone.
4. Don't talk negatively about the other parent. Even if you believe your child cannot understand what you are saying, you could be wrong. Simply create a rule for yourself that you will never talk negatively about the other parent in front of your child.
5. Move on with your life. You need to fulfill yourself as a person and move past the divorce. It is always something that will be part of you, and that's OK. However, you need to continue to live and grow. Doing that will show your child that the divorce is not the end of the world, that life goes on and everyone needs to continue to grow. Happy parents mean happy children, so if you work at fulfilling yourself, you create a happy, well-adjusted home in which your child will thrive.