



# Parenting Apart

**COPING WITH VISITATION**

**BY BRETTE MCWHORTER SEMBER**

It's no one's dream to be a single parent, but since half of all marriages end in divorce and at least as many unmarried couples break up, single parenting is a reality. Separating or divorcing after a baby has come into the picture can be stressful and difficult, but coping with visitation issues is easiest if you remain flexible and patient.

## Two is better than one

Unless the other parent is abusive or dangerous, it's usually best for a child to spend time with two parents. Work to develop an ongoing parenting partnership with the other parent. Even though you are no longer a couple, you will be parents together for the rest of your lives. Put aside your personal problems and work together as a parenting team.

## Sharing and preparing

If you are separated or divorced during pregnancy, you can begin to create a two-parent life for your child before birth. Include the other parent in childbirth classes and the birth (even if you choose someone else as your primary childbirth support partner). Discuss how to share time with your child after the birth. Think about your schedules, driving distance between your homes and the needs and routine your child is going to have for the first few months. Remember that no schedule should be set in stone. It is essential that both of you remain flexible.

Make sure the other parent has the necessary baby equipment and supplies. You might want to consider attending infant care classes together. If your child will spend time with grandparents, include them in the parenting classes and certifications as necessary, especially on subjects such as CPR, water safety (drowning), and car seat installation and use.

## Dealing with legalities

Going to court is a necessary step in organizing your child's life. Get a referral to an attorney from your local or state bar association. You may also use a mediator, who can help you and the other parent create an agreement yourselves (contact the Academy of Family Mediators at 202-667-9700 or [www.acresolution.org](http://www.acresolution.org)). If you do not create your own agreement, the court will create a visitation schedule for you. It is important to remember that you and the other parent can alter this schedule (as long as you both agree to any changes) as your child grows and as your lives change.

Getting the legalities taken care of will offer you peace of mind. "I'd recommend making sure you have all of your legal ducks in a row and also have a good support system to help you through it all," says Marte Lafferty of Pittsburgh, PA, whose son began visitation at birth.

## Baby steps

When creating a visitation schedule for your infant, start in small increments. You might want to begin with an hour of visitation at your home every day or every other day. Gradually increase this to two or three hours a few times a week at the other parent's home. Most new mothers feel most comfortable if visitation takes place while they are present, but the other parent has to be given the freedom to develop parenting skills and a bond with the baby.

While most experts won't recommend overnight or extended visits until a child is three years old, it is important to remember that everyone's situation is different. If an overnight visit once a week works for you and the other parent, your child will not be

## Baby Equipment Alternatives for a Visiting Parent

It is usually not practical to transport needed baby equipment with your child, but the parent who has visitation rights can still be equipped without purchasing an entire duplicate set.

INSTEAD OF A	HE/SHE SHOULD HAVE A
Full size crib	Folding travel crib
Changing table	Folding changing pad
Baby bathtub	Foam kitchen sink liner
Toddler bed	Bed rail
Deluxe stroller	Lightweight folding stroller

harmful by it. If you want or need to set up extended visitation, gradually work up to it by slowly increasing the length of visits.

## Breastfeeding and visitation

It is possible to breastfeed successfully even if your child spends extended time with the other parent. Start pumping milk as soon as possible and build up a supply. Make sure the other parent understands the benefits of breastfeeding and how to transport, thaw and feed expressed milk to your child. Meet with a lactation consultant to plan for breastfeeding and visitation and to help you work out problems as they come up.

## The schedule

The schedule that should be most important is your child's schedule, not the visitation schedule. One week your baby may be feeding on demand every two hours, making an extended visit difficult, another week your infant may have an ear infection and scream all night and sleep all day. Assess your child's needs and try to work around them. Make substitutions without reducing visitation time.

Donna Mecham of Sierra Vista, AZ began dealing with visitation when her son was six months old. She suggests parents may have to recognize that sometimes, "what works for your schedule won't work with the other parent." She also advocates that parents try "to disrupt the child as little as possible."

## Toddler time

Young toddlers are very schedule oriented, so it is important to keep the schedule stable. If your child naps from 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM each day, make sure that you can work visitation around this. You also need to consider how your toddler handles longer visitations and in-between time. For example, you may wish to schedule visits twice a week for three hours instead of one six-hour visit. ▶▶

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\*Check state or local laws



## Parenting Apart

### Separation anxiety

Of course you are going to be nervous and worried when you are apart from your child. There will certainly be times when your child has trouble making transitions between parents. All of this is completely normal. However, developing a relationship with both parents is essential to your child's emotional well-being. Encouraging a relationship with the other parent is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child. Put your own feelings about and history with the other parent aside and focus on your child.

### Coping

Parenting an infant and coping with visitation are two very stressful situations that are even more stressful when paired together. Being a single parent is not going to be easy, and neither will working with the other parent to make sure your child has contact with him or her. There are steps you can take that will make the situation easier for you. When Mecham's son began going on visitations she was nervous. "I made sure I knew where my ex was going to be, taking my son and picking him up. I also made sure that a friend went with me." She points out "If the parents work together and both try to make the visitation less of a challenge for the other, it will go smoother."

Hartnell got past her worries about visitation "...by telling myself that it was important for [my son] to have a relationship with his father, and the benefits of that outweighed the possible problems." She points out that to get through the difficult periods when her son would cry or be upset she and her ex "had to work together... Be

## Items to Transport with Your Baby on Visitation

- Car seat (unless each parent has one)
- Pacifier
- Special blanket
- Special toy
- Diaper bag with a few diapers and wipes for use in transport
- Breastmilk if nursing
- One or two bottles for use during transport
- Sweater or cover up
- A change of clothes
- Any necessary medication

prepared compromise on the things that don't really matter."

Lafferty says her worries were "about the baby's safety and my own." Women who are concerned about their own safety need to obtain legal assistance or go to a domestic violence shelter. If you feel your child is in danger or has been harmed, contact your state child abuse hotline and hire an attorney immediately (or pursue help from a legal aid agency).

When your child is new to the world, it is hard to think about giving up time with him or her. Visitation is about giving your child the benefits of having two parents. Working together to do this will offer your child incredible benefits. ■

**About the author:** Brette McWhorter Sember is an attorney and family mediator. She is the author of *The Visitation Handbook: Your Complete Guide to Parenting Apart* (Sphinx Publishing, 2002).

## Resources for Single Mothers

<http://www.lalecheleague.org/Law/NBjanFeb96p4.html> (Information about breastfeeding and visitation)

<http://www.singlemothers.org/>  
[www.parentswithoutpartners.org](http://www.parentswithoutpartners.org)  
<http://www.svnetwork.net/VisitPamphlet.html> (Information about visitation)  
[www.singlemoms.org](http://www.singlemoms.org)

*The Visitation Handbook: Your Complete Guide to Parenting Apart* by Brette McWhorter Sember (Sphinx, 2002)

*The Complete Single Mother* by Andrea Engber and Leah Klungness (Adams Business Media, 2000)

*The Single Mother's Book: A Practical Guide to Managing Your Children, Career, Home, Finances, and Everything Else* by Joan Anderson (Peachtree, 1990)