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HOW TO HANDLE THE VISITATION ARRANGEMENTS WITH YOUR EX OVER SUMMER VACATION

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Seven tips for keeping the back-and-forth transitions as smooth as possible

Though summer is already underway, it is still not too late to put some strategy into play for quelling the hassles with your kids and your ex while going through the back-and-forth with your ex and your child (children) for the next couple of months.

As I mentioned in a prior article, the year-end holidays are often the most sensitive times of the year when it comes to sharing custody of the children. But, the summer school break can be just as difficult; maybe more so. For one, parents are usually with or away from his/her child (children) for a longer period of time; often, for up to a month or more.

Because you obviously had differences with your ex (or you would have stayed together with him/her) you may find yourself more frustrated or uptight while trying to agree on a summer schedule. That is, if one has not been already set by the courts or if you have not established one for this year yet.

In any case, there are ways to mitigate the hassles and stress when school is out for the summer and it's time to share time with the children. The following are seven tips to

ensure that these summer transitions go more smoothly this year, as well as planning for next year.

1. Consider the needs and wishes of your child (children): Parents should consider plans children have made or would like to participate in. Often, ex's get into control issues with one another during the summer vacation planning (trying to shirk or monopolize the amount of "custody" time) without ever considering what the children might like to do with their coveted time off from school. If it has been your custom with your ex to divide the summer in half, and now your teenage kids only want to spend two weeks with you and the rest of the summer with your ex (because her/his house is their primary residence), consider their feelings. Know this: Teens typically rebel when they feel forced to do just about anything; smaller children need constancy and structure. As children grow, their needs and wants change. It is hard enough for children to go back and forth between parents without the added disappointment of missing out on a summer activity they want to sign up for or participate in.

2. Talk to your child ahead of time (or now) to make the planning process go more smoothly: Without any coercion or bias, talk to your children about his/her preferred schedule; encourage them to do the same with your ex. Vow to sit down together to work out a fair and workable summer schedule even if this meeting takes place at the last minute. **That said, an optimal time for such a meeting might be before the end of January each year. If you are a last minute kind of planner, meet up soon, even by phone or over the Internet to make some specific plans.**

3. Try to stick with the plan: What causes most of the distress (arguments, hard feelings, resentment) are constant requests to change the summer vacation schedule once it is in place. Some do this in the midst of summer! **No one likes disruption. Especially the children. And, as parents, you may have plans of your own. Make it a point to honor the plan you agreed to. Last minute requests can be irritating to all those involved.**



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4. Give and Take: Notwithstanding my admonishment above, and though it may have been hard during the marriage or cohabitation to “give in,” when you have children together, you must be able to give a little. If selfishness or a “me-first” attitude was one of the reasons you left your ex—or you were the perpetrator in that department—it is time to put others first. Namely, your children. If changing up the schedule here and there over these pending summer months is reasonable (and I emphasize reasonable) and what is needed to keep the peace, do it. You don’t have to be walked on, but you don’t want to be so fixed or rigid that there isn’t any wiggle room to make an occasional concession. Also, if your ex has a new significant other, and she/he and the kids are going on vacation together, keep your feelings in check. That is another demonstration of “giving,” even if you don’t feel like it. Be gracious.

5. Don’t surprise your ex with a last-minute demand: This suggestion differs from the one above (I was referring to “requests” not “demands”). For example, it would not be fair to tell your ex during the pickup of the kids that you will be keeping them an extra 10 days because your trip to Hawaii had to be extended due to the reservation mix-up. You can certainly ask for such a major change, but don’t demand it. And, don’t get hostile or snippy with your ex if he/she pushes back on that demand. After all, he/she may have some fixed plans of his/her own. Be fair. If he or she is willing to accommodate you, always offer something in exchange. Making a demand can kick off a legal war. That’s the last thing you want during the summer!

6. Make plans of your own: Some parents suffer from separation anxiety when their children are away from them for what is perceived to be too long. **If your kids are with your ex every other weekend and during the school year, and suddenly now half the summer; like a month or more, this may cause you emotional discomfort. Don’t count the days, instead plan ahead to do things you never *get to do*. Plan your activities in January—the same time you lay out the summer visitation schedule. If you dread the upcoming summer away from the kids, making some plans of your own is the perfect remedy for having something to look forward to. Conversely, if you are the long-distance parent and it is hard to say goodbye, plan lots of activities for yourself the day the kids depart. That can make the separation transition a bit more comfortable. Also, focus on the next time you will see them. That, too, reminds you they are still very much a part of your life, ongoing.**

7. Work with your therapist: If the longer time gap (summer, away from the kids) makes you feel depressed and lonely, contact your regular therapist or find one. If you are already in therapy dealing with various divorce issues, this person is already plugged into your fears and anxieties. Increase your visits from monthly or by-weekly, to going once a week or more, if necessary. Over time, these therapy visits will help you to be less co-dependent on your child (children). That's a good thing because inevitably your child (children) will grow up and leave home. If you are a long-distance parent who finds it hard to send the kids home after an extended summer visit, make certain you reach out to a qualified therapist to help you transition back into your regular routine.

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