

Best Practice: Tools and Tips for Divorced Parents and Divorce Professionals

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Making child exchanges work for you and your children

A potentially difficult but common problem occurs for divorced parents when their children resist the exchange from one household to the other. Based on an informal survey of the parents with whom I work, the majority of children of divorce who are referred to my office resist exchanges at some point. In most instances, children's resistance is relatively infrequent and minimal: minor complaints and foot dragging ("I'm tired, I want to stay here"). But when the underlying issues are more serious, resistance can range from crying and clinging to verbal and physical defiance (running away, violence). Yet not all resistance is indicative of an underlying problem. Adolescent complaints, for example, about going back and forth between homes are often age-appropriate experiments in self-assertion and independence striving.

The first step towards addressing exchange resistance is to assess why it is occurring. In general, the reasons fall into five categories: 1. Structure of the parenting plan, 2. Situational factors, 3. Child temperament factors, 4. Family dynamics, and 5. Realistic concerns.



Parenting plan

Even the most thoughtful parenting plan can inadvertently create barriers to the children experiencing an exchange as an easy, efficient transition from one parent to the other. Preschool age children who previously stayed in one home may experience frequent shifts between parents' homes as confusing, even frightening, until they understand and can anticipate the new arrangements. Children may also protest exchanges when the parenting plan introduces new nannies or daycare arrangements or separation from a familiar care provider. With older children, exchanges at school can be difficult when children must haul around bulky athletic equipment or musical instruments in addition to personal items such as a change of clothes: Where do I store my hockey gear at school until Dad picks me up this afternoon? What about my suitcase? But a 6PM exchange on Friday night at the other parent's front door may necessitate a long drive in rush hour traffic and a delayed dinner – a recipe for an exceptionally irritable child.

The frequency of exchanges can also be a factor – but this must be carefully balanced against over-long separations from either parent. A week-to-week plan requiring just one exchange often works well with teenagers who resist the more frequent exchanges that occur on a standard schedule; they often find midweek exchanges for a night or two

to be tiresome and disruptive. But younger children generally need more ongoing contact with both parents than a week-to-week schedule allows. For them, a good parenting plan shortens the separations but does not impose an inordinate number of exchanges.

Exchanges may be particularly difficult if the plan requires a parent to pick up a child at the other parent's home for the start of parenting-time. Consider, for example, how difficult it can be to pry a child away from the beloved pet or favorite video game in the other parent's home. As an alternative, it is often more effective for one parent to deliver the child to an exchange.

Situational factors

Situational factors are often in play when the child's resistance is relatively mild and infrequent. Young children, for example, may protest when it is time to travel to the other parent's home in the middle of a favorite TV program. Or they may be responding to one-time considerations, such as the party or family trip they don't want to miss or the family event they do want to avoid. Children also resist for understandable, practical reasons, such as when all the material for the science fair project due on Monday is at one parent's home but they are scheduled to be at the other's for the weekend. And when children have to travel long distances from one home to the other, they may reasonably complain about the unfairness and inconvenience of the arrangement and their dislocation from cherished friends or favored activities. In instances such as these, parents usually find that gently reminding their children about what is expected and flexibly accommodating practical matters resolve the issue satisfactorily. By doing so, parents model an open-minded approach to the children's needs and prevent minor incidents of resistance from becoming precedents for an entrenched problem.

Child's temperament

A clue that other factors are at play is when the intensity of a child's resistance is out of proportion to the situational factors present. Stronger resistance to exchanges can be driven by temperament factors as well as situational ones. For example, anxiously inclined children may protest separating from a parent to whom they traditionally turn for reassurance and comfort. They may cry, cling, and appear shaken and panicky when expected to shift from one household to the other. Children who prefer routine and sameness and resist entering novel situations may also appear anxious at the time of exchanges – particularly during the early stages of separation and divorce when they are adjusting to so many changes in their lives. In other cases, children with oppositional-defiant behavior patterns may resist exchanges to assert their will and coerce other concessions. Their protests will appear angry rather than anxious – and subside as quickly as they erupted if they successfully wheedle a desired favor. In some instances, parents have placated their children during the early stages of divorce – allowing the children to dictate the schedule and exchange times. But doing so may inadvertently reinforce the children feeling over-empowered – leading them to strongly protest when the parents try to reassert authority.

Absent other, more serious problems, the majority of these children respond positively when given a gentle but firm reminder that not accompanying the other parent is not an

option – they must go just as surely as they must go to school. It is important for parents not to over-react sympathetically or to appear similarly anxious about the impending separation – thereby heightening the child’s distress.

An exception, however, is when adolescents resist exchanges as a means of self-assertion, learning thereby how to express their interests and their preferences. In these instances, it is often helpful for parents to give their independent-minded adolescents more freedom of choice and a greater say in how their lives are organized and how they will maintain meaningful contact with both parents.

Developmental factors can also lie behind exchange difficulties. Two or three-year-olds, for example, have a better understanding than younger children that an exchange is more than greeting a loved parent – it also involves separating from another loved parent. Thus, children of this age may fret and protest exchanges whereas before they handled them seamlessly. These children’s coping efforts can be supported with transitional objects (favorite blanket, pictures), predictable schedule, coordinated child management practices in each home (e.g., wake-sleep schedule), and reassurance.

Family dynamics

Children’s resistance to exchanges becomes most problematic when family dynamics are involved. Detailing such complex dynamics is beyond the scope of this overview. Briefly, problems at the time of exchange can be driven by the introduction of stepparents or stepsiblings, alienation issues, differing child management philosophies, high conflict between parents, and extended family issues. And children are strongly inclined to feel anxious and resist exchanges when the family has a history of acting out conflicted family dynamics at past exchanges. In these latter instances, it may be necessary for families to use third parties or exchange facilities to manage the exchanges. In some exceptionally entrenched situations, it may be necessary for a Judge or court officer to speak directly to the child, compassionately but firmly defining the Court’s expectations of the child’s compliance with court orders and the consequences of not doing so.

Realistic concerns

Finally, it should be emphasized that realistic concerns can also trigger children’s resistance to exchanges. They may resist, for example, accompanying a parent who is disinterested, abusive, or has mental health or substance abuse problems. When conflict or even violence has accompanied past exchanges, the child may reasonably want to avoid a situation where further conflict might occur. If children overhear parents threaten to kidnap or not return them to the other parent, they will reasonably want to avoid accompanying the threatening parent. When such realistic concerns are present, it is often necessary to use judicial protections and therapeutic remedies before exchanges can occur peacefully.

Tips for improving exchanges

Even if a parenting plan calls for a different method of exchange, parents are reminded that in most cases the written parenting plan is a default position if the parents don’t agree

to something else. But if both parents believe that the parenting plan is causing difficulties, and they can agree to a better way to handle the exchanges, in most cases they are free to make such adjustments

In general:

- *If children have difficulty managing exchanges, arrange exchanges to occur when only one parent is present – such as at the start or end of the school day.* This helps buffer children from witnessing and feeling tensions between the parents and it coordinates the exchange with regularly occurring transitions in the children's daily lives – easing the exchanges and helping them seem normal.
- *When exchanging directly, the parent who has the children should, whenever possible, deliver the children to the receiving parent.* In this way, the receiving parent does not have to “pry” reluctant children away from the other parent's home (or the video game they are playing, or the friends with whom they are finishing a project, or the TV show that is only half over).
- *Avoid discussing or negotiating issues at exchanges.* An exchange should focus on exchanging children, not to resolve disputed issues or to register complaints. Parents may communicate simple information (“John's medication is in his bag; he will need to take it before every meal”) at the exchange but should discuss other issues at some other time.
- *Do not “debrief” children after an exchange with close questioning about the children's time with the other parent.* Debriefing children makes them feel potentially caught in the middle: a spy or defender for one but at the cost of feeling a betrayer of the other. The parent “reported upon” is likely to feel annoyed – deepening mistrust of co-parenting motivations.
- *Schedule a distracting, fun activity at the start of parenting time* to decrease the relational intensity of the first minutes. Stop for a meal at McDonalds or run an errand at Office Depot – and inquire if the children need any school supplies as long as you are there.
- Put the parenting plan on a calendar and post it in the open so that the children have a visual “map” of what to expect.
- When constructing a parenting plan, seek a workable balance between the frequency of exchanges and the length of the children's separations from each parent. Remain open to changing this balance as children's developmental needs change.

When situational factors are present:

- Anticipate situational roadblocks and try to avoid them. For example, instruct the children to turn off the engaging video game 15 minutes before the exchange time.
- Expect the unexpected – situational events are generally outside of one's control. Prepare expected responses to meet unexpected events.
- View situational barriers as opportunities to teach children how to problem solve.
- To handle situational events, find situational solutions.

When the child's temperament contributes to difficult exchanges:

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- For anxiously inclined children, parents can adopt the same approach they might use to teach a children to ride a bicycle: Introducing the activity with excitement, anticipating the fun of mastering the activity, holding them steady as they first try to balance themselves, giving them a firm push and a loud “way to go,” providing a quick dust off when they tumble and then confidently encouraging them to try again, rewarding their success.
- Insure that children are rested and well fed before the exchange.
- Allow children to take transitional objects such as blankets, toys or favorite games between homes.
- Have pets greet children when they arrive for parenting time.
- Avoid tension at the exchange: exchange the children, not information.
- Treat the exchange as a normal event rather than a “big event.”
- Avoid direct exchanges between parents – use third parties or set transitions at the start and end of school when both parents are not present.
- Avoid over-sympathizing in a way that reinforces the child’s fears and protests.
- Do not give the child a false picture (e.g., “you don’t have to go if you really don’t want to”).
- Avoid letting children set the time and place of an exchange; demonstrate openness and flexibility – but maintain the authority.

When exchanges are complicated by family dynamics or heightened emotions at prior exchanges:

- Arrange exchanges to occur at the start or end of school so that both parents don’t have to be present.
- Utilize a third party or transition facility to manage exchanges.

Extreme reactions

In a few instances, children resist exchanges physically, even violently. Young children may scream, hit, kick, or flail against a parent who tries to pick them up. They may run off, threaten to call the police, or yell out accusations for the neighbors to hear. Older children may threaten verbally or simply say “make me,” knowing full well that their parents will not try to use physical force. Multiple causes usually drive such extreme reactions; multiple intervention strategies carefully coordinated are usually required to solve them. In addition to the previous tips, in these instances:

- **Throw water on that fire, not gasoline.** In instances of extreme reactions, the child is having an emotional and cognitive meltdown driven by temperament, family dynamics or realistic fears. The child is not able to reason, self-reflect, and control impulses. Consequently, it is exceptionally important that the parents not meltdown similarly. To manage the situation constructively, parents should remain calm and thoughtful and maintain a problem-solving perspective.
- **The walk away alternative.** When faced for the first time with extreme resistance, parents often don’t know what to do. In these instances, it is reasonable to forgo the exchange – rather than risking injury or emotional trauma – until the parents can assess the problem and plan effective ways to support their children transitioning from one home to the other.

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- **Nip it in the bud.** But it is important to intervene quickly rather than waiting to see if the problem will clear itself. Repeated instances of extreme reactions can: 1. risk emotional trauma for family members, 2. reinforce children's fears, 3. heighten mistrust between the parents, or 4. lead children to feel over-empowered. Although a parent may appropriately decide to leave without the child when faced with extreme reactions, it will be important for the parents to communicate and coordinate their efforts before the next exchange. If the parents cannot coordinate their efforts and neither one can intervene effectively on their own, then it may be necessary to involve the legal system or third parties to insure that exchanges don't become an automatic trigger for reflexive explosive reactions.

An example

After some extremely difficult exchanges and tense words, Mary and Bob developed the following exchange plan:

- Exchanges were limited to exchanging children, not information. Information was exchanged by phone and email. The children were not asked to carry information or to ask questions for either parent.
- When parenting periods changed on a school day, the exchange occurred at school: the parent in possession dropped the children off at school at the start of the day and the receiving parent picked them up at school at the end of the school day.
- When parenting periods changed on a weekend or holiday or summer vacation day, the parent in possession delivered the children to the other parent.
- The exchange procedure was carefully choreographed:
 - The children's church youth counselor was present for several subsequent exchanges to encourage and reinforce the children's cooperation with the parents.
 - The delivering parent was expected to arrive within a window ten minutes before or after the agreed exchange time.
 - The delivering parent prepared the children for the exchange by turning off distracting activities, such as the television and electronic games, and prompting the children to pack up their things.
 - The delivering parent encouraged the children to bring something for the receiving parent, such as a school paper or a drawing or a recently found treasure (the sparkly rock found on a walk).
 - The parents explained to the children that if they dawdled too long, clung to the delivering parent, or otherwise resisted a transition, they would lose equivalent amount of television and videogame time.
 - The delivering parent – or one of the children – called the receiving parent five minutes before they expected to arrive at the receiving parent's home to say they were on route.
 - The receiving parent waited at the front door and stepped onto the front porch with the children's dog when the delivering parent pulled up.
 - The delivering parent got out of the car to help the children get out with their possessions – but remained by the car at the curb.

- Once all three children were safely on the porch, the delivering parent left.
- The receiving parent immediately involved the children in a planned activity, such as walking the dog or having a meal, to complete their transition.