

**Best Practice: Tools and Tips for
Divorced Parents and Divorce Professionals
Mark R. Otis, Ph.D.
Dallas, Texas**

Managing children's phone calls with the other parent.

Phone calls are potentially important links for children and parents during scheduled separations. Effective phone contact eases feelings of longing, helps maintain continuity of relatedness, and is an efficient way to manage practical issues. One adult woman reported that the strength of her relationship with her father was based on his daily call to her since her parents divorce twenty years prior. The phone calls were not long, often not more than a minute, but their accumulated weight meant the world to her.



But phone calls between parents and children rank second on the list of problems that divorced parents bring to my attention: “Phone calls with the other parent are too long and intrusive but my phone calls are too short and abrupt.” “The other parent calls all the time but my calls are never returned.” “The children aren’t allowed to use the phone.” “The children have too much access to the phone.” “The other parent always calls at inconvenient times.” “The other parent rarely calls; the children feel abandoned.” “The children are too young to have cell phones.” “The children need cell phones.” And so it goes.

In general, phone contact between parents and children feels natural and rewarding when the calls are relatively brief (e.g., 5 or 10 minutes), regular (1 time/day), focused on the news and goings on of the day, and do not interrupt the flow of activity in either home. One boy and his father, for example, had a regular routine: As the boy spooned up his breakfast he called his father to trade good mornings, highlights of the day’s anticipated activities, and “I love you” before going on about their days.

To manage phone contact, consider the following guidelines:

- Place phone calls at opportune times – not in the middle of the other household’s dinner or homework time or at the end of the day when the other parent is trying to settle the children for bed.
- Be flexible – volunteer to call back if you inadvertently call in the middle of an activity at the other household.
- Tell your children about your day and listen to them describe their experiences – but don’t make children feel uncomfortable with questions about their activities in the other home.
- Its okay to say you are looking forward to seeing the children again – but don’t reinforce them feeling sad or guilty by emphasizing how much you miss them.

- If you and the other parent are likely to disagree about an issue, separate child phone calls from adult phone calls; don't poison the child's experience of making contact with you by overhearing you argue with the other parent.
- If children's frequent calls to the other household interfere with the flow in your home, consider limiting their calls to one or two a day. Similarly, consider limiting the length of calls (e.g., 10 to 15 minutes) if they are interfering with the child's involvement in the home.
- Many young children have difficulty with phone calls – they just don't “get it” about that disembodied voice on the phone receiver. To help them, place a picture of the other parent by the phone or set up a video phone. Additionally, practice phone calls at home – using a cell phone and a house phone to help young children understand that physically present or not, that voice is real.
- Limit your calls to the children to once or twice per day – and only call if they have not already called you.
- As long as children don't over-use the privilege, let them call the other parent freely.
- With older children, text messages and email is often the most effective – and least intrusive – way to maintain daily contact.
- If the other parent calls and leaves a message, pass it along to the children. Don't screen messages unless they are inappropriate or intrusive.