

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

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Managing participation at public events

Parents want to participate, at least as spectators, in their children's academic, religious and extra-curricular activities. Indeed, watching children score a soccer goal, play in the band concert, or participate in a scout cook-off is one of the most rewarding aspects of parenting. And divorce research indicates that the more children are more involved in rewarding activities the better their adjustment after divorce. But parents undermine the benefit their children gain from these activities if they carry over conflict and tense communications to the public settings in which their children participate. Parents, therefore, have a responsibility to manage their tensions so that they do not ruin the children's experience of these activities.

- When parents experience relatively low tensions and don't over-react toward one another, they can use mutually agreed upon etiquette guidelines so that both parents can attend children's activities without disrupting the children's enjoyment.
 - Will we sit together or separately?
 - Answer: If sitting together makes either parent uncomfortable, don't.
 - Are we expected to exchange more than casual greetings?
 - Answer: Generally no. But small talk is certainly acceptable as long as it does not lead to in-depth discussion about difficult issues.
 - Is it okay for our new spouses or partners to attend?
 - Answer: Not always.
 - The children will probably want to greet and spend time with the parent who did not bring them. How will we handle that?
 - Answer: Let it happen. It is natural and expected that children greet family members warmly and enthusiastically.
 - Is it okay to leave the event at the same time? Or should one of us hang back and let the other clear the elevator or the parking lot first?
 - Answer: Be discrete, be polite, be courteous.

- If tensions run high and one or both parents react angrily in the presence of the other, it is important to have strict boundaries and rules of etiquette.
 - In general, it is wise for high-conflict parents to only attend extra-curricular events during their parenting time and not during the other's parenting time.
 - If the venue is large enough (e.g., an athletic field), parents attending at the same time should park in separate locations, stay on opposite sides of the venue, and avoid interaction – **BUT ONLY IF BOTH PARENTS' ATTENDANCE DOES NOT UPSET THE CHILD.**
 - High conflict parents should avoid interacting, verbally or nonverbally, at public events.

- Some children have difficulty separating from the parent who does not have possession at the end of the activity. In these instances, regardless of whether tensions run low to high between the parents, children may cry, cling, or protest accompanying one parent rather than the other. In these instances, it may be necessary for the parents not to

attend the same activities until the child has mastered the skill of seeing one and accompanying the other without anxiety and protest.