

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

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Tips for Success
(complete set)

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I. Parallel versus Cooperative Parenting



Following divorce, parents adopt varying expectations and styles of co-parenting. These different styles generally fall along a continuum from little cooperation to extensive cooperation.



Parallel Parenting

At one end of the continuum, referred to as parallel parenting, parents rarely communicate or coordinate their efforts. Each parent manages the children and the children's experiences entirely apart from the other. In a parallel arrangement, the parents rigidly follow the divorce decree, deferring all questions to the divorce decree mandates. The most common reason that parents adopt a parallel approach is to avoid heightened conflict.

Cooperative Parenting

At the other end of the continuum, called cooperative parenting, parents communicate frequently, coordinate their efforts, make joint decisions, and treat the divorce decree as a general guideline rather than a rigid set of rules to follow. Parents adopt a cooperative approach when they communicate and negotiate without rancor, have developed a good working relationship, and want full involvement in all aspects of their children's lives.

In most instances, parents blend these two styles – communicating and cooperating about some issues but parenting independently on others. A mother and father, for example, may communicate frequently and make joint decisions about education issues but make entirely independent decisions about the children's after school activities during their respective parenting times.

It is important to note that children's adjustment following divorce is tied to the absence or presence of parent conflict rather than the style of co-parenting. Either approach – or a blend of the two – can work if it effectively minimizes conflict. Parents who have a high degree of mutual regard, enjoy collaborating and can negotiate child-related matters without conflict find a cooperative approach useful. But parents who have a history of misunderstanding, heightened negative emotions and mistrust often find that a parallel arrangement post-divorce is the best way to parent without conflict.

Tensions occur when parents have different expectations about the extent to which they will parent in parallel or in cooperation. If one parent wants to engage the other parent frequently about child-related matters but the other parent prefers to avoid interaction whenever possible, both are likely to be frustrated: one feels shut out, the other feels intruded upon. It is important, therefore, for parents to be mindful to reaching a consensus or a compromise about their parenting style to keep frustration and conflict to a minimum.

The primary differences between cooperative and parallel appear below:

COOPERATIVE PARENTING

Parents actively engage one another as co-parents.

Parents communicate regularly.

Parents may, at times, communicate personal information about one another.

Meetings are informal and held when necessary.

Meetings or calls occur spontaneously.

Major decisions are discussed and made jointly.

Parents collaborate regarding child-related issues.

Schedules are treated as flexible and negotiable.

Parents discuss issues regarding the child and the other parent.

Communications are open, wide ranging, regular and discussion oriented.

Child-related information is conveyed and discussed.

PARALLEL PARENTING

Parents are disengaged from one another; they parent independently rather than collaboratively.

Parents communicate infrequently; sometimes only in event of an emergency.

Communications are businesslike – not personal. Personal information is not shared.

Meetings are formal, preplanned, and often conducted in public places or with a 3rd party.

Meetings or calls occur during business hours at a specified time for a specified period of time.

Major decisions are communicated rather than discussed.

Parents function independently regarding child-related issues.

Schedules are followed exactly. The schedule is written down in detail for both parents.

Parents refrain from discussing the child's relationship with the other parent. Parents do not advise the other parent how to parent.

Parent communications are infrequent and often in writing or email rather than directly.

Child-related information is conveyed but not discussed.

Boundaries between the homes are flexible.

Boundaries between homes are fixed and relatively impermeable.

Agreements may be informal, hand-shake arrangements.

Agreements are documented in writing to avoid misunderstandings.

The divorce decree is viewed as a loose structure around which the parents make flexible arrangements.

The divorce decree is viewed as a tight document to be followed carefully.

Exchanges occur at times and places that are most convenient for everyone.

Exchanges occur at school, day care, or extra-curricular activities to minimize contact between the parents.

Parents share school information.

Parents are responsible for getting school information independently.

Parents negotiate changes directly with one another.

Parents negotiate changes with a 3rd party's help.

“If a problem has no solution, it may not be a problem, but a fact, not to be solved, but to be coped with over time.” S.Perez

II. Child exchanges

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:

- 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.
- **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.

III. Managing tensions 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. If the presence of a new spouse or partner creates unneeded and unwanted tension for the children and the other parent – don't.
 - 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.

IV. Managing tensions in school settings and medical professional offices

It is important for parents to be fully informed and involved in children's education and medical care. When parents manage their tensions well and collaborate effectively, joint meetings with medical professionals and school faculty are an efficient way to gather



information and make decisions. But when tensions run high and parents have a pattern of arguing and disagreeing rather than collaborating, joint meetings can trigger rancor rather than cooperative effort. In these instances, parents are advised to adopt different guidelines to keep conflict to a minimum while still insuring each parent's involvement:

School

- *Develop an independent relationship with school personnel to insure timely receipt of the children's school information.* Don't overburden the coparenting relationship by depending upon the other parent to provide copies of all school related material.
- *Keep the other parent informed about school related matters when the information is not readily available.* Pass along copies of report cards, school announcements, and school calendars.
- *Do not talk critically about the other parent to school personnel.* It is exceptionally important not to draw school faculty into the middle of parents' disagreements.
- *When parent tensions run high schedule separate teacher conferences so as not to distract school faculty and the parents from an objective discussion of their children's educational needs.*
- *Each parent should be able to attend school events (e.g., presentations, assemblies) during either parent's designated parenting time. But if parent tensions run so high that joint attendance poisons the experience for the child, parents should only attend school events during their designated parenting time.*

Medical

- *It's hard to communicate too much about medical issues.* Immediately inform the other parent about medical concerns, prescriptions and physician instructions.
- *If heightened negative emotions prevail, schedule separate appointments with the medical providers.* Conflict and disagreement at a doctor's office negatively affects children's health care by distracting parents and medical personnel from addressing objectively the medical issues at hand.
- *Do not comment critically about the other parent to medical providers.*
- *Have a written understanding about how medical costs will be shared and the procedures for evening them up.* Include medical expenses such as orthodontics and eye glasses in the agreement.

V. Extracurricular activities

To maximize the value of extracurricular activities for you and your children and to minimize misunderstandings between households, consider the following tips:

- *Before a parent signs the children up for an activity that overlaps both parents' time, it is best:*
 1. To get the other parent's commitment to support the activity.
 2. To decide if and how the costs will be shared.
- *When prevailing tensions exist between parents, it often helps for parents to choose extracurricular activities that do not overlap the other parent's time – thus avoiding the need to coordinate or impose upon the other's time. A parent may arrange, for example, to take tennis lessons with their child only during that parent's designated parenting times. An alternative is for parents to encourage extracurricular activities sponsored by the school – a neutral, common site.*
- *The parent scheduled to have the children on a particular day should negotiate directly with the children when the children have conflicting activities. For example, if a child has overlapping activities on one of her father's designated weekends (i.e., a soccer game scheduled at the same time as a peer's birthday party on the weekend she could go on a girl scout campout), the mother can inform the father about the activities but should then leave it to the father and the child to decide which ones she will attend – since the child can't attend them all. In this instance, the father and mother could certainly discuss what each thinks is most important or how the arrangements can be juggled, but the final decision would rest with the father and the child since it is his designated time.*
- *In instances of heightened parent conflict, parents should consider limiting the number of extracurricular activities they attend during the other's parenting time in order to avoid the children feeling uncomfortable during what should be an enjoyable activity. A reasonable and desirable long-term goal is that each parent can freely attend the children's activities regardless of the parenting time schedule. To get to that goal, however, the tensions between households have to lessen to the point that the children are not affected or distracted by them.*
- *The necessity to exchange equipment between households for extracurricular activities can be used as an opportunity to teach children about responsibility for their possessions.*

VI. 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.

VII. Some final tips

Communication

- *Communicate enough to inform and coordinate but not so much that communication becomes intrusive and inefficient.* A rule of thumb is to communicate fully and immediately about matters such as education, social concerns, and health and in the normal course of events and with less detail about day-to-day matters.
- *Use email, fax, and written correspondence in lieu of one-on-one discussion to address difficult topics.*
- *Reinforce the boundary between the past and the present.* Keep communications focused on the present and future concerns; avoid rehashing past issues and events. Apply this same rule of thumb to communications with your children. From a developmental perspective, children are in “fast-forward.” They are concerned primarily with the present and how it extends into the future – not with repeatedly revisiting the past. Encouraging children to repeatedly remember troubling past events and feelings interferes with their natural developmental press to look forward.
- *Do not, under any but the most extreme emergency circumstances, participate in emotional meltdowns.* Avoid discussions, situations, or issues that are likely to trigger you, the other parent, or both of you to yell, badmouth, criticize, argue disagreeably, or verbally attack.
- *To avoid inflaming tensions further, do not communicate criticisms or disrespect for the other parent to the children, to extended family members, to mutual friends, coaches, or professionals involved with the children.*

Parenting time schedule

- *Respect one another’s time and activities with the children during their designated parenting time.* It is important, for example, that parents respect the other’s right to make independent decisions about structuring and organizing activities with the children during their respective parenting periods. For example, if a father learns that their son has the opportunity to attend a soccer clinic on one of the mother’s Saturdays, the father can pass on the information to the mother as an option for her to consider, rather than as something she must arrange.
- *Generally avoid asking for a portion of the other’s parenting time or asking the other to trade time.* Parents can offer time (“I have a meeting this Saturday during my time with the children, would you like to have them?”) without asking for a trade in return. In most instances, these matters even up naturally over time.

Practical matters

- *It is exceptionally important to reliably fulfill practical responsibilities* (picking up and dropping off children at the designated time, dutifully following the “rules” or “guidelines” established in the orders, promptly evening up monies owed, conveying information in a timely way). By doing so, parents reinforce clear boundaries, eliminate needless irritations, communicate respect, and build trust.
- *By living in proximity to one another, divorced parents can simplify practical matters.* They find it easier to access the school and extracurricular activities, to facilitate the children’s relationships with peers, to minimize drive time between households, and to reinforce the children’s sense of place and belonging in the community. This becomes even more important as children get older, are more involved with friends, and may have a job or girlfriend or boyfriend that they want to see frequently.