

## Parenting From A Distance

by Cindy Strasheim, Extension Educator

### Long Distance Parenting

Parenting is never easy, even when the parent and child live in the same house. For the parent whose children live elsewhere, parenting can be especially challenging.

Long distance parenting is usually defined by number of miles traveled one way by the child. The standard in some states is 180 miles.

Whether the parent moves across town, across the state, or across the country, it signals the end of the familiar family pattern. Neither parent nor child can pretend that distance doesn't matter. Staying connected to children is important for their emotional, social, and physical development.

Kids have a right to love both parents. In all but court restricted visitation, kids have a right to enjoy spending time with each parent. The love between a parent and children can be strengthened with some innovative parenting techniques.

### Review of Research

*"Separating Together—How Divorce Transforms Families,"* reports research with 160 families in the Boston area during the '90s. The landmark study focused on how each family member changed during a divorce to help create a peaceful co-existence between homes.

Abigail J. Stewart, one of five researchers conducting the study, states, "Across the different kinds of adjustment, we have found material, resources, a sense of safety, and dyadic closeness (close to the custodial and noncustodial parental homes) to be factors that facilitate adjustment in the earliest period after separation." Therefore, a family environment that meets the basic needs of children with the least parental conflict provides the best opportunity for children to grow positively through the divorce.

Children who were torn between loyalty to both parents were less adjusted and exhibited more illness as reported by their mothers.

### Parenting Plan

A parenting plan provides a businesslike way to develop guidelines to improve family interactions. Parenting plans usually state specific holiday visitations, celebrations, monetary guidelines, and regular visitation. The focus of

the plan is on the child's right to spend time with both parents and still have needs met. Although visitation and child support are set by the judge, it takes the cooperation of both parents to make the plan work for the child.

### Positive Anticipation

Deena L. Stacer, M.A. of Team Works in Mesa, Arizona, suggests children who lack enthusiasm for visiting the nonresidential parent may need to experience "*positive anticipation*."

The child may feel the "other" home is boring. When they send this message, the noncustodial parent may think they don't have enough *neat stuff*. This may be a false interpretation. Often children wish for significant interaction instead of things. Talk about the reason for the boredom.

*Positive anticipation* is building future activities with children so they look forward to visiting the distant parent. This does not include bribing or showering with "things." It does mean that a goal is set for some future event and problem-solving takes place during each visit to achieve that goal. This planning time gives kids a sense of control over their visit, teaches them problem-solving skills, and encourages them to anticipate the next visit.

Examples: If camping was a family activity before, plan a new camping trip together. Phone calls, e-mails, and weekend visits can provide time to plan a pretty incredible summer camping vacation. Perhaps the goal will be a sporting event, a rock concert, or a cultural offering. Build up the excitement by planning how to reach the goal together. Make it a team effort.

Residential parents can make or break the mood of "*positive anticipation*." The child's needs should be foremost to avoid the spillover of parental anger and revenge.

### Creating a Shorter Distance

Distance is closer than you think. Available technology allows the distant parent to contact a child by:

- e-mail;
- instant messaging;
- phone;
- surface mail.

- *Air travel*, if accessible, can be a hassle for children traveling alone after 9/11. However, if the opportunity is there, both parents can cooperate and help the child through the process.
- *Living arrangements* can be a special team effort. Anticipation about working on the child's space in the distant home can make for many long-distance conversations and fun activities.
- *Quality time* in large amounts is one of the "Six Family Strengths" identified in studies by John DeFrain, extension family and community development specialist, and Nick Stinnett, professor of human development and family studies at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. The feeling of too little time together frequently leads the distant parent to overplan the visit. Keep activities realistic and allow plenty of time for the child to ease into the "other" home.

- *Transition* between homes is difficult for both the child and each parent. In a show of loyalty, a child may shut one or both parents out before and after the visit. Children need this time to power up or gear down their feelings, attitudes, and behaviors.

## 72 Hour Transition

Research is clear about the need for transition time for children and adults after a parental confrontation. The body pours adrenaline into the system for the fight or flight response and it takes 72 hours for the body to return to normal functioning. Now, imagine the child who switches parents on weekends and in the middle of the week! Unless parents make a cooperative trade, everyone loses 72 hours and maybe a whole week because of the escalation of conflict. Even the anticipation of conflict can cause the body to react with these stressful symptoms.

## Keeping Connected

### *E-Mail*

E-mail is an excellent way to stay in touch every day. A computer is not necessary with portable e-mail devices.

### *Audio-Video Tapes*

Videos of fun times will remind the child of the love connection. Homemade audio tapes of jokes or stories will keep kids occupied and create memories.

### *Mail*

Children love to get their own mail! Writing frequently is more important than writing long letters. Children can hold letters and re-read them, keeping memories and the feeling of being loved.

### *Telephone*

Call to chat, to read a story, to say "I love you." Keep conversations focused on the kids to keep them out of the middle of parental comments. Phone cards, cell phone numbers and 800 numbers increase secure feelings of love and connection.

### *Instant Messaging*

Kids get to chat with their parent through the keyboard. This can help children feel an instant connection with the long-distance parent.

### *Movies*

Send a ticket for a movie. Both of you go to see it and talk about it on the phone.

### *Books/Magazines*

Subscriptions can help a child practice reading. The parent may have the same magazine and they can have a discussion about the articles.

### *Gifts*

Gift certificates or small tokens can be used as incentives for grades, behavior, chores, etc., but they should not be used as bribes or one-upmanship trophies against the other parent.

### *Thinking of You Box*

Children love to get things that remind them of time spent together. Simple items can make lasting memories of being loved. Pictures, clippings, and ticket stubs all have meaning.

## Mailbox Suggestions

### *Do*

- Write about feelings;
- Share parts of your life;
- Ask questions;
- Send pictures, cartoons, stickers, jokes;
- Create a secret code and send messages;
- Send self-addressed stamped envelopes;
- Say "I love you and I miss you."

### *Don't*

- Write too much;
- Write to criticize or question the other parent;
- Expect letters as frequently from the child as those sent by you;
- Use sympathy or guilt to manipulate behavior;
- Say "I'm so sad without you."

## Parental Tasks to Facilitate Visitation

- Avoid prying
- Avoid eavesdropping
- Encourage open discussions
- Allow feelings to transition
- Help plan the transfer
- Cooperate for the child's sake
- Keep child out of the middle
- Be consistent
- Be loving
- Be flexible
- Be affirming

## Resources

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