

Divorced Parents Speak Out! **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Last week's Q & A, "My Ex gets all of the glory—what can I do?" provoked an intense discussion among readers—often at opposite ends of the spectrum. Many emails came from parents who only get to see their children six or seven days a month, many noting that they would do anything to see their kids more. Most felt that the infrequency of their visits promoted trying to make the time spent together as pleasurable as possible. Other non-custodial Dads and Moms who wrote in felt that they were doing a great job balancing fun with chores, even if they only saw the kids on alternate Wednesdays and every other weekend. Then there were the custodial parents, many on tight incomes, who raised even more issues than in the original article. You, the readers and writers, spoke volumes, and you deserve equal time.

First, let's take a look at some responses from non-custodial parents. Perhaps Michael, from New Jersey, says it best:

"Your last two articles hit the nail on the head for many split families. I am a divorced father. I have the same visitation arrangement as the father with the two daughters in the first article. However, unlike the second article, I pay a substantial amount of money to my ex wife in the form of child support and alimony. Simply supporting myself with the basic necessities leaves a minimum of funds to spend on extracurricular activities. There is rarely enough money on hand to take my children to the venues they'd like to go to. Amusement parks, restaurants and movie theatres are often out of reach. And although my child support is substantial, my children mistakenly feel that Dad never buys them things; everything they need, Mommy purchases for them. Mom has the extra funds to take them to sporting events, movies, purchase clothes, etc. While I'm glad they ultimately get to do these things, and I know that my money makes it possible, in the end the arrangement trivializes my contributions by making Mom the focal point when it comes to making these purchases. I'd love to have the funds available to improve the quality of the time the children spend with me. I'd like to spend my money myself, to purchase needed items for my children, rather than send it to my ex and allow her to get all of the credit for my hard earned income in my children's eyes. Finally, I'd like to say that since it's mostly men who receive visitation, our authority as a Father is severely reduced by only seeing our children less than 25% of the year. We are under pressure to entertain for the few brief days we get to spend with our children. We avoid coming down too hard on our children when needed, because our main fear is that they might not want to come visit us anymore. *Non-custodial parent* is one of the lowest ranked titles ever created."

And, from a forthright father who quickly gets to the point:

"Maybe Dad just misses the heck out of the kids and wants to have the best time possible. If he can afford it after being mom's money tree, then so what. Maybe Mom needs a better job. It's true that kids will realize what parent was what, but sometimes Dad has to do the best with what's available."

Rozanne from Tennessee, a divorced mother of three, gave several suggestions as to how to show concern and love for your children even though funds may be tight.

“With regard to the single mother of an 11 year old, I understand exactly how she feels, but here is how I handled things as a single mother of 3: finding ways to tell them how much I love them just as they are, knowing that because I am always there for them is the best way to tell them how much I love them, remembering that they are children, and that they can only react to life based on their maturity and life experience - don't expect a child to understand things like an adult, and remember that we adults don't always behave or make good decisions - that our reactions are sometimes more of a "spoiled brat" or jealous fit. Her son's reactions and comments were relayed through her opinion of the situation. It's her ego speaking - all of us have one, and it's hard for many of us always to feel bested or in constant competition with an "EX". Our children are not stupid - a child learns patterns of behavior from his parent. Remember the interaction you have with your baby - mimicking our expressions and learning to "read" us through our facial expressions. The first three years of life of our children is overwhelmingly molded by this. Her son is testing his ground. He is approaching the second “break “with both of his parents - he is prepping for being a teen. And, she should consider this point - when a woman divorces her husband, a son can feel threatened, especially if, as parents, they have always emphasized how much he is like his father. Her son may be afraid that since she "got rid" of his father, she may do the same to him. I found it always better to focus on finding ways to tell my children how much I love them and how glad I am that they are part of my life, that is remembering things they have done that made us proud and remembering things that made my "heart swell" - like holding them and watching them smile at me, being there when they succeeded, watching them learn. I have boxes of memories of each of my children, and although they are now 16, almost 18 and 21 we love to get the boxes out and go through their "life's memories" - drawings they made, notes they wrote me, toys and clothes they loved. You were correct to advise her that most kids eventually "get it" - we adults forget that we were once children, and saw the world through a child's eyes.”

Marca in Virginia cuts to the chase, suggesting the following conversation with the son: “I'm glad you can do these things with your Dad. I can't afford the expenses involved, but isn't it nice that you and your Dad can do these things together.” “ Leave it at that. Find some "special things" to do together. It needn't cost much money. A video and popcorn and ice cream sodas on a Saturday evening. Making a favorite meal together. Maybe once a year Mom and son can splurge a little on a special vacation--either camping or a decent hotel for a couple of days some place special (mountains, beach, big city) depending on budget. Save and plan for it together. As this 11-year-old grows up he will appreciate the "gifts" each of his parents were able to give him--and especially that they didn't pit one against the other with the son in the middle. Mom just needs to look at the long range picture and not allow herself to be upset that her son is feeling normal for his age.

And, finally, Lesley from Ohio suggests what she describes as a simple solution, but one that may not be appropriate or practical in some cases:

“Regarding the divorced mother who complained that her child's father did all the fun stuff. I have a simple solution to her problems - joint custody. She may feel that her son is spoiled by his father. He should be. It is inexcusable that a child would see his father only every-other weekend. A child needs more than an occasional father. If she didn't want Dad to "have all the fun" she shouldn't have stripped him of his rights to care for his son. I understand that there are times when one parent or another might not be fit, but in most cases, this is NOT the case...”

It's obvious from these passionate comments that coping as a divorced parent is tough, and often becomes a minefield of emotion. There are many sides to consider-- yours, the other parent's, step-parents', grandparents' feelings and opinions and of course the child's outlook. If divorced parents could cooperate and work well together many of these issues wouldn't exist. But, if that kind of cooperation and communication were available they may not have split up in the first place.

It is possible, though, to communicate better with a counselor (pastor, therapist, mediator) helping to guide you along the way. The therapist can also serve as an objective ear for your child to discuss feelings, concerns and suggestions. As it's often difficult for divorced parents to not focus upon old hurts and former dynamics, at times it's downright difficult to be able to keep the child's best interest in perspective and as a priority. Check with your pediatrician, religious leader or school guidance counselor for recommendations of therapists who specialize in this area. In my experience these problems often become worse as the kids get older if solutions between unhappy ex-spouses don't improve. Making some changes now can prevent hurt feelings and lost relationships in the future.