

## **Making the Most of Summer Visitation** **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Every summer thousands of children travel out of town to visit with their non-custodial parent as part of the visitation plan set up at the time of their parents' divorce. Depending upon circumstance, age, distance as well as economic factors, the time spent visiting can range from one to seven or eight weeks during the summer. Frequently I hear from children in my private practice who feel that they have either enjoyed, tolerated or barely survived this ritual for years, either alone or with their siblings in tow.

The kids have taught me much about what makes for a successful visit with the non-custodial parent. Generally success involves the realization that nothing is chipped in granite. What works well for one family may be a recipe for disaster for another. If you try out one set of rules (length of time of the visit, how the child spends the days with the non-custodial parent, communication with the custodial parent during the visit) and it doesn't work, be prepared to discuss changes and to try alternatives during the next extended stay.

There are some general guidelines, though, that will help *all* of the family members to feel more comfortable with extended summer visits. Remember that all of the individuals have fears, positive anticipations, and wavering emotions about the impending visit. The custodial parent often worries about the children's health, safety and emotional adjustment to spending a length of time in a different atmosphere. The child is concerned with how time will be spent, whether the parent will be accepting or rejecting, or if there is a stepparent or stepsiblings how that will play out. And, the non-custodial parent often has to deal with his or her own feelings of possible rejection, uneasiness trying to communicate with a child who isn't enmeshed with the family, and how to coordinate work responsibilities with quality time spent with the youngster.

In looking at extended summer visitation with an out of town parent, it's helpful to divide the responsibility for success into three parts—the cooperation and behavior of the custodial parent, how the non-custodial parent communicates and stays in touch with the children during the school year (prior to the summer visit), and how the time with the non-custodial parent is spent during the visit.

### **The Custodial Parent's Responsibilities:**

1. **Be cooperative.** If the children and the non-custodial parent are to communicate by telephone try to arrange family activities so that the kids are at home during the scheduled phone time. If this is difficult, a cell phone makes it easier to get calls while you're on the go, and relieves the stress of having to rush home. If communication is to be by email, allow easy access so that the children can send or receive messages at will, when the moment moves them, or when something especially exciting has happened and they want to share it with the other parent.
2. **Communicate food preferences, medication needs and quirky habits.** You'll not only be helping out your ex-spouse by sending along a general idea of what the kids

will and won't eat, but the children will be better fed and in a more positive mood! Be especially specific about medications to be taken—times, dosages, and possible side effects. In your conversations (by telephone, in person, or written) give the other parent the names and telephone numbers of all physicians involved in your children's care.

3. **Don't deprecate the non-custodial parent.** Saying negative things to the kids about their other parent throughout the school year only sets them up for a tenuous summer visitation. It may cause loyalty conflicts, poor self-esteem for the children, and a bad attitude about seeing the other parent. Keep adult issues between the adults—let the kids off the hook when it comes to post-divorce quarrels and grievances.
4. **Focus on the positives of the visit.** Saying, "Remember how much fun you had camping last summer with Dad" is a lot more encouraging than "Don't worry, you only have to spend four weeks with your father and then you'll have the rest of the summer to play with your friends here at home". The kids know that you love them and will miss them—sending them off with a positive attitude will make their stay much more enjoyable. *It gives them permission to have a good time, to reconnect with the other parent, and to take advantage of learning experiences and opportunities that you may not be able to provide.*
5. **Have the kids well rested before leaving for the visit.** Most likely the children will be anxious during the days leading up to the visit. Whether they will be flying or going by car, the trip will be taxing. Try to keep down the number of slumber parties and massive candy attacks during the week before leaving—it will help to keep them calm and able to make the transition easier.
6. **Use your "break" wisely!** After a week or two, you just may find yourself enjoying some quiet time for yourself. Visit with friends that you've been too busy to spend time with, join the gym, or just catch up on some sleep. Take advantage of this time to renew your spirit, friendships and activities. The kids will be back before you know it!

### **How The Non-Custodial Parent Can Stay In Touch During The School Year:**

1. **Keep in close communication.** Whether you're planning to use email, faxes, regular mail, or the telephone realize that communication when your children are not with you is just as important, or even more so, than when they are visiting. Although the weekly phone calls or nightly emails may seem tedious, they are well worth it. Not only do you know what's going on in your child's life, he or she will appreciate your effort and concern. Sure, the kid may, at times, want to make the call as quick as possible in order to return to a TV show, but during other phone calls she may pour out her heart to you. Even a two-sentence email helps, the words are often irrelevant—it's the thought that really counts. And, make sure that you let your children know how much you appreciate the random photos and pictures that they send, just as much as the Mother's Day or Father's Day cards and presents. The more you gush about their art productions (especially for grade-schoolers), the more frequently you'll receive stuff worthy of a place on your refrigerator door. And just think how proud they'll feel when they visit and see that your kitchen is a tribute to their artwork, photos, and great report cards!

2. **Stay in touch with your child's school.** Arrange for the school to either mail or fax to you the monthly newsletter as well as all report cards and conference reports. Let your children know that you're aware of the Halloween festival and the various booths and activities. Discuss their grades (both good and those needing improvement) with them, just as you would if they were living in your home. Let them know that even though you are not physically with them during the school year that you are on top of their progress and expect them to do their best.
3. **Periodically check out the local newspaper in your children's locale via the Internet.** Your kids will marvel at how you're aware of the new addition to the zoo or the stats of the local high school football team. This also contributes to topics of conversation that can keep the calls and emails interesting.
4. **Ask your child about the things most near and dear to his heart.** Talk about his dog and inquire about the latest antics. If your kid is a skate boarder familiarize yourself with some of the lingo and inquire about progress made as well as any new bumps and bruises. Talk about the things that the two of you have in common and send him newspaper clippings, magazine articles, or emails with attachments that he'd like to see. Consider playing a computer game with him online once or twice a week—he'll love it and you just may get hooked on it too!
5. **Be creative.** Send videotapes of your new puppy, home addition, the fish that didn't get away, or even audiotapes describing your day and some special moments with your child that keep popping into your head. Sing a song, get silly—even if your kid thinks it's a bit goofy she'll probably enjoy your musical rendition and will definitely appreciate the thought. Buy her a tape recorder, mailers and stamps, and have her send a tape to you—I guarantee that you'll treasure it forever. Encourage your child to send you letters by providing stamped, self-addressed envelopes—that makes it so much easier and even small children can send their own drawings or notes to you with ease.

### **Planning And Carrying Out The Visit:**

1. **Well before the children are to arrive, ask them what they would like to do during the visit.** *Just as important, find out what they **don't** want to occur or to spend time on.* Compromise when possible, but they'll have to understand that you'll do your best but that they are with you as a family, not on a four or five week free-for-all vacation. Beds may still need to be made, bedtimes or curfews kept, and certain chores may need to be accomplished. Check into community activities such as day camps, recreation centers, swim teams, or church camps that may be of interest to your children. Although you'll want to spend lots of time with them yourself, most kids enjoy being around others their own age.
2. **Accept that there will be a transition time of at least a few days.** Younger children often become quite clingy with a parent that they haven't seen in a while, and teenagers may be a bit sulky or surly, especially if they feel that your home is not nearly as interesting as theirs. Ignore some moodiness at first, but if it persists, have a discussion about enjoying the time you are able to spend together, not wasting it on what they are not getting to do at their own home. Also, expect a few days of

transition to occur prior to returning to their residence and plan for the possibility of some moodiness or clingy behavior at that time.

3. **Allow easy access to the custodial parent.** Encourage your children to telephone, email or write the other parent on a regular basis. This allows them to see that everything's fine at home and that they can relax and enjoy their visit with you.
4. **Discuss your work obligations.** Let the kids see your schedule and try to work in their activities as best as possible. Plan a short trip if you can—I've found that the most memorable experiences of children of divorce are the camping trips during the summer with Dad! If you absolutely despise bugs and the great outdoors try to come up with something that everyone will enjoy and remember. Don't forget to keep some mementos from the trip that you can send to the kids throughout the year.
5. **Build in individual time with each of the kids.** Depending upon their ages the children may want to do different things with you. Discuss options and try to fit in some one-on-one time (even if it's only for a few minutes a day) with each child. Some will take you up on it, and others may prefer to play outside with their friends. Don't be offended—they probably have the same priorities and interests in their own residence—the other parent has just grown used to it!
6. **Reacquaint the kids with your neighborhood.** Remember, they've been away for awhile and may have forgotten the names of the other children in the neighborhood, where the park is, and some of the adult neighbors that they've enjoyed in the past. Describe and clarify their boundaries so that their limits on roaming the area are clear to all. Introduce them to any new children that you've come into contact with, as well as new activities at the local community center.
7. **Be prepared to politely answer all questions and concerns during the visit from the custodial parent.** Realize that the other parent, by virtue of not seeing the children on a daily basis as usual, will have concerns. The best way to keep molehills as molehills and to not allow them to be elevated to the status of a mountain is to promptly answer (by phone, email, letter or fax) any questions or concerns. While the children are in your home and under your supervision you are making the decisions, but give serious consideration to the other parent's experienced suggestions.

### **I've Saved The Best For Last!**

The final suggestion is my personal favorite—of course taught to me by my kid clients. One of the neatest things that non-custodial parents and their children can do during the summer visit is to start a long-term fun project while they are together. The child takes part of it home to continue to work on during the school year, as does the non-custodial parent. This can be very helpful for communication during those awkward phone calls when it seems that there is nothing new to say, and it helps to keep the two of you in sync. Then, when the child arrives for the next visit, both halves of the project can be put together—as are the parent and the youngster. Stumped for project ideas? Try writing a journal together during the visit, adding to it separately during the school year, and putting it together when the two of you meet again. Not big on writing? How about picking a national professional team sport, making predictions for the year while you're together, both keeping a log during the year and seeing who "won" by being the most

accurate. Or, begin to build a model kit together, send the easy part home with the child (don't forget the instructions) while you complete the more difficult half during the school year. Put them together, and shoot off your mini-NASA rocket in celebration of the beginning of the summer visit! Up for a new pet? How about a turtle, goldfish, or even a puppy? This can be the child's pet, but you are taking care of it during the school year. Of course, constant updates on the turtle's behavior will be needed, and don't forget to add some humorous tidbits! Small children will be thrilled with an email discussing their turtle's adventures, and older kids love to "talk" to the dog over the telephone. Whatever the "project" is, make it fun, interesting to all, and use it in your communication with the children.

These guidelines will help you to stay in touch and in the hearts and minds of your children. I know that it takes perseverance, especially if the kid doesn't seem very interested in communicating or visiting with you. I firmly believe, though, that most children want close relationships with out of town parents and your efforts will not go unnoticed. Your kid will not have to worry whether you'll recognize her at the airport—she'll be confident that you not only know what she looks like on the outside, but that you're in touch with and value the person that she is on the inside!