

**Q & A—Can I tell my Dad that I’m bored with our visits?
Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Question: I’m a 15 year old girl and my parents have been divorced for a long time. My little sister and I live with Mom and see our father every other weekend and every Wednesday afternoon and evening. We spend the night and he drops us off at school the next day. This was okay for a while, but it’s beginning to cause a problem with getting homework done and my sister keeps leaving her books at Dad’s and getting in trouble at school. He’s a nice man but he doesn’t let us go out with our friends on the weekend—I’ve missed about four football games this year and it can be really boring at his house. I don’t have much in common with my father and sometimes it seems like we have nothing to talk about. I know that he loves us and never misses a visit, and I don’t want to hurt his feelings in any way. Mom says that she won’t get involved (they barely talk with each other) and that it’s between Dad and me if I want to deal with the problem. Am I wrong to have these feelings?

Answer: Feelings are never wrong, but how you handle them can make all the difference in the world! As a child growing up in a divorced family it can be difficult to please both parents, especially since it sounds as if both want to spend time with you and your sister. Because you are a teenager you are also getting to a point where spending time with your friends is increasingly important. That’s normal and to be expected, and I can easily understand your boredom at Dad’s house if you don’t have friends in his neighborhood. The answer is to compromise so that not only are *your* needs met but also your Dad’s desires in regard to spending time together and enjoying the relationship with you and your sister.

I’ve worked with many families who have developed compromises that seem to please everyone. Some kids find that spending less time on weekends visiting the non-custodial parent but more on the weekdays works best; others like to bring a friend with them for part of the visit or arrange to be dropped off at the mall or the movies for a few hours, just as you probably do when spending the weekends with Mom. Some folks “trade” their mid-week visits (disruptive to homework) by taking the kids to school in the morning and catching up on each other’s lives during the morning drive. Other parents begin new hobbies or develop mutual interests with their children so that the time spent together is more fun for everyone. Some folks spend part of their visits taking interesting classes together (pottery, photography, scuba diving) or trying out new activities such as camping or taking day trips. Playing each other on video games, board games or taking bike rides together can not only help you to keep busy, but may kick-start mutual interests that you and your father, as well as your little sister, can enjoy for years to come. And, don’t forget to fully explore his neighborhood—there may be some kids your age to hang out with right around the block.

It’s important to let your father know how you feel, but please do so in a kind, positive fashion so that he’ll be non-defensive and able to listen to your real message. It sounds as if love is not the issue—the problems are lack of communication and mutuality of interests. Put simply, you and Dad just don’t know how to enjoy each other! He’s

probably not very interested in chic flicks or shopping at the mall, so the challenge will come in terms of finding or developing activities that are pleasurable for all.

Talk with him. Most likely he'll understand your desire to spend some of the weekend time with your friends if you explain that you do so at your mother's home, and it's important to you to keep up the friendships. Balance is key—explain that on some weekends you'd like a friend to visit for a few hours but that you'd also enjoy some time alone with him and your sister. Your dad would most likely enjoy getting to know your friends, but may have felt that his visits with you should be devoted to his children, not realizing that everyone may enjoy the weekends more when there is a variety of activity available.

Level with him—you may be surprised at how understanding he will be especially if you let him know that your desire is to spend time with him but to make it as pleasurable as possible. Keep in mind that there are only a few short years until you are an adult and may leave for college, something that Dad has probably already been considering. Most likely he treasures every minute with his kids, but doesn't quite know how to best communicate with, entertain or understand two daughters. Also, try to brainstorm with your father and your sister as to how to best keep the school books, homework and folders organized so that your Thursdays are less disrupted by the Wednesday sleepovers.

It's a shame that Mom doesn't feel comfortable intervening and helping you to solve this dilemma. But, if that's the reality it may be up to you to try to solve this problem directly with your father. Is this fair? Definitely not, and it's a pity that the two most important adults in your life are acting less mature than their child. But please do not let that stop you from communicating your concerns and trying to develop a better relationship with your dad. It will take guts and compassion to have this conversation, but if it works, everyone wins!