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Nonresidential Parenting After Divorce

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This publication gives information to help both parents remain involved in their child's life after divorce. It lists ideas to help nonresidential parents maintain a strong relationship with their child, gives tips on how both parents can cooperate for their child's sake, and offers resources for coping with guilt.

WHEN we think about a single parent, we generally mean the parent with whom children live after divorce. But the nonresidential parent—the parent the child does not live with—is also a “single parent.” There has been less focus on providing support for the needs of nonresidential parents.

Challenges of being a nonresidential parent

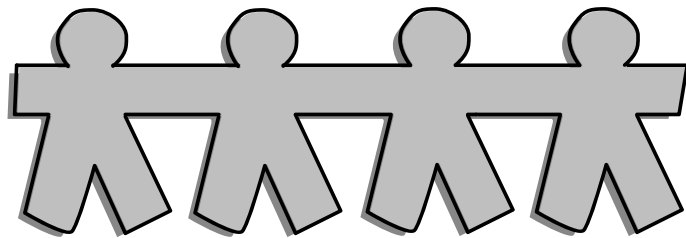
The role of the nonresidential parent is often unclear. There are few role models for how parents in this situation can remain an active part of their children's lives.

Maintaining a normal parent-child relationship is challenging for nonresidential parents, because they are not:

- Able to spend time with their children on a daily basis.
- In a situation where they can help their children make daily decisions.
- Included automatically by some schools, churches and youth organizations when sending out information on their child's activities and progress.
- Viewed by some as still being a member of the family.

Keeping involved

Children do better in life if both parents remain involved in their lives following divorce. Here are some suggestions for nonresidential parents to help them keep involved in their children's lives.



Suggestions for nonresidential parents:

- Be reliable and consistent. The pattern for maintaining contact with children is set within the first one to two years following divorce.
- Avoid doing exclusively fun activities when your children are spending time with you. Include them in regular household routines.
- Set up your home so that your child has his or her own room or space when staying with you. Leave notes on the bed or dresser praising them for an accomplishment or simply telling them you love them.
- Pick up your children and drop them off at the agreed upon time with a smile and a hug. Say good-bye the same way. A difficult visit often can be “rescued” by a caring good-bye.
- If you need to change the scheduled time to be with your children, do so ahead of time. If an emergency arises, call your children as soon as possible to let them know you cannot make your scheduled time.
- Volunteer in your child's school. If you live too far away to do it regularly, volunteer for special events.
- Be sure that your child's school has your contact information. Ask them to send copies of grade reports and other parent information to your home, too.
- Ask your friends if your families can do activities together when your children are spending time with you.
- Invite your child's friends to join you in family activities.
- Keep in touch with your child's interests and activities.
- Get to know the parents of your child's friends.
- Avoid discussing disagreements between yourself and the other parent with the children except to say, “We have different opinions about this.”
- Work with your former spouse on parenting issues.

For nonresidential parents who live long distances from their children:

- If you live a long distance away, phone, write or E-mail them on a regular basis. Try setting a time each week when you can call them.
- Make video tapes of your activities and send them to your children.
- Send postcards or greeting cards.
- Keep a daily activity diary of what you have been doing. When you are spending time with your children, it will help you remember what you might want to share with them.
- Keep a log of what the children have been doing so that you can ask them questions about their lives when you are together. Ask your former spouse for this information. Then when you see your child or talk to them on the phone you can say, “What a terrific spelling test, a B+,” or “How was your Saturday hockey game?” This will help start a conversation more easily than simply, “How are you?”

As children get older:

Understand that as your child gets older he/she may stay with you less often due to school activities, sports and friends. Talk about changing needs as your child gets older. Think about other ways to keep in contact. Instead of overnight stays, you may want to change to spending dinner and an evening together.

It is important to maintain involvement with adult children as they need your continued parenting too. Children who are “launched” into the adult world before the divorce still experience a difficult time dealing with the divorce of their parents.

Tips for residential parents

Residential parents can help their former spouse stay involved in parenting. Except where there are legally documented reasons that the child should not be in contact with the nonresidential parent, encourage chil-

dren to maintain that relationship. Residential parents can help in the following ways:

- Talk to your former spouse about your child’s friends and parents.
- Let your former spouse know if the child is having any problems.
- Give the school your former spouse’s contact information.
- Tell your former spouse about any new interests of the child.
- Call them when important moments occur, such as your child losing his or her first tooth or making a soccer goal.
- Encourage the children to keep in contact with the nonresidential parent. Children may need a reminder to call Dad on Father’s Day or to send a birthday card.
- Work with your former spouse on parenting issues. If your child is having difficulty in school, discuss it with the nonresidential parent and enlist their support in helping the child.
- Have the child ready when they are to be picked up by the other parent.
- Inform the other parent about events that involve the child. Nonresidential parents often need extra notice about upcoming events if they live a long distance away.
- Encourage your child’s relationship with the other parent.

Suggestions for both parents

Be flexible if situations arise where time with the other parent needs to be adjusted.

Work with your former spouse on discipline issues. You may not always agree, but discussing the differences will help you know the rules in each home.

Keep issues of the marriage and divorce separate from issues of the children. When discussing parenting issues, keep other issues out of the conversation.

Avoid being too permissive or restrictive in parenting. Use what is called democratic parenting, where rules are

fair and consistent, and parents use a lot of warmth in their parenting.

When cooperation is difficult

Sometimes parents are unable to work together in parenting. Children who have parents who cannot work together on parenting issues and continue to have conflict after divorce have a difficult time adjusting to divorce.

If you are unable to work together, seek help from a third party. Find a friend, family member, counselor or mediator who can assist both of you in deciding what you can agree on and how to handle issues where you disagree.

Coping with guilt

Most parents at one time or another, experience feelings of guilt about their parenting. For divorced parents—especially for nonresidential parents—this can occur more often. You may feel that you don’t spend enough time with your children or that they do not have everything that you had hoped for them to have.

- Avoid trying to make up for the losses children experience.
- Be consistent in your parenting.
- Help your children learn through the divorce process that they can have happy, healthy lives.
- Seek support through friends, family members, or a counselor if the guilt becomes overwhelming to you.

Over time, most adults and children adjust to divorce and lead happy fulfilling lives. Parents play a large role in helping children make this adjustment. By continuing to be involved in your child’s life and working with your former spouse on parenting issues, your child will benefit.

Parent Daily Activity Diary Example

Keeping track of your daily activities

Writing down your daily activities can help you remember events that happen from day to day so that you can recall them when you spend time with your children. At right is an example of an activity diary to help keep track of the events you want to share.

Try to find a regular time to write in it every day so that important thoughts don't slip your mind.

The suggestions here are just ideas to jog your memory. You may or may not have entries for each idea every day, or you may have others not listed here.

What I did at work today	
What happened at home today	
News events I found interesting today	
Something good that happened to me today	
A funny thing our pet did today	
Something I read that might interest my child	
Something interesting that I saw today	
Something that made me think of my child	

Child Activity Log Example

Child activity log

Keeping a log of activities and events in your child's life can help to enhance the time you spend together. Write down information you receive about your child from various sources. Sample ideas are listed in the chart at right.

You may or may not want your log to be as formal as this, but it makes sense to keep all of the information in one convenient place for your reference.

Things we talked about last week	
Things I forgot to ask about last time we talked	

I want to ask my child about the following activities coming up this week:

Activity

at school	
in sports	
other organized activities	
at home	
other	

Resources for nonresidential parents:

Dads At A Distance
<http://www.daads.com/>

Moms Over Miles
<http://www.momsovermiles.com/>

Hart, A. (1997). *Helping children survive divorce: What to expect, how to help*. Nashville: Word Publishing.

Ricci, I. (1997). *Mom's house Dad's house: Making two homes for your child*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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