

MAKING VISITATION WORK

Visitation. Even the word sounds ominous, like something you might do with a prisoner. If you're a divorced dad who gets the kids maybe twice a month, I know this is one of the greatest challenges you face. You don't have free access to your kids, and when you do see them, there's pressure to make the most of your time together. Unfortunately, kids sense that pressure and it changes things.

If you feel uncomfortable without always having something to do together, that might be a clue that there's a larger issue that you and your kids need to discuss. But generally, in time, you can settle into a workable routine.

Let me offer a few suggestions that may help smooth out a tough situation, borrowing from Kenneth Parker and Van Jones in their book, *Every Other Weekend*.

First, give it some time. There are adjustments to make for you and your children. You'll all have to take on slightly different roles, and make some changes. Be flexible in how you relate to your kids.

Second, stay loose. You may be tempted to cram your weekends full of hectic video arcades, all-day amusement parks, exhausting zoo trips, loud pizza palaces and on and on. But remember to leave room for just hanging out together, or give your children choices of what they'd like to do. Capitalize on shared interests, or hobbies you can do together, where you're free to relate to one another instead of being entertained. Eventually, as you all get used to the arrangement, you'll spend more time camping, beachcombing, bicycling, playing board games, doing hobbies, and watching TV together. The artificiality or the feeling that you're having a "fathering appointment" will fade soon enough.

Next, try to set aside a place in your house that's just for your child, whether it's a room, a corner, or a bookshelf. She needs to feel a connection to you and your house; she needs a regular reminder of the special bond between you two.

Fourth, don't force your values on your kids. By all means, talk about your beliefs and what's important to you, but also realize that your kids may be getting a slightly different message from their mother. Unless they're doing the kids harm, you'll probably have to live with her ground rules. Don't put down her system -- it will create a lot of confusion for the children. This is especially important in the areas of entertainment, behavior, household rules, and traditions.

Finally, be flexible and cooperative with your children's mother. If she needs to change the arrangements this month, don't refuse just to spite her. You aren't obligated to do everything she wants you to, but your kids will benefit from seeing the two of you cooperate.

And let me add this warning: The time may come when a child says, “I don’t want to go with you this time, Dad.” Your first thought might be, I’m losing my daughter, but you can’t listen to that voice. What’s really happening is that your child is changing, and that means the relationship is changing, too.

As a child grows, she acquires new interests, relationships, and commitments. Sometimes she’ll have other important things going on, and it’s time for a dad to be flexible and understanding. It does no good to force her to come with you or make her feel guilty about it. Instead, just keep lines of communication open. Tell her, “Sweetheart, it’s hard because it seems we get so little time as it is. But I can live with that. I want you to know that I need to stay connected with you. You’re my daughter and I love seeing you.” Then, stay as involved as you can through whatever means are available -- regular phone calls, e-mail, and letters. Maybe there will be other opportunities to spend time together.

The most important thing is that your child and her well being is still a top priority. How you’re involved may change, but as a committed dad, you’ll find a way to make it work.

In all things listen, listen and love, love.