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239-288-7664

www.TheGuardianLawFirm.com

Time-sharing dos and don'ts

For both parents and children, time-sharing is critical to maintaining a sense of connectedness both during and after a divorce. In the early stages of family restructuring and co-parenting, however, time-sharing is frequently a source of conflict. If former spouses want revenge, finding ways to spoil a time-sharing is easy. If they want to help their children through a difficult transition, they will find ways to make time-sharing successful. For time-sharing to work, both parents need to accept and acknowledge that their children have two homes -- one with their father and one with their mother. Parents need to make sure that their children are safe and comfortable in both places, even if they don't spend equal time there. Parents need to help make the transition from one home to the other smooth and calm. They also need to make sure they are being consistent in rules and discipline.

Constructive parenting goals

The following guidelines are examples of parenting goals that can help children grow into healthy, happy, whole people:

- Both parents should encourage time-sharing to help their children grow in positive ways.
- Children need to know it is OK to love both parents.
- In general, parents should treat each other with respect for their children's benefit.
- Each parent should respect the other's child-raising views by trying, when possible, to be consistent

Tips for Smooth Time-sharing

Parents should work together to make time-sharing exchanges and the time-sharing itself a positive experience for all. Some ideas are:

- Be as flexible as possible with schedules.
- Treat your former spouse with respect.
- Help children feel safe and comfortable in both homes.
- Develop routines to give children a sense of security.
- Maintain open communication lines with your former spouse.
- Don't question your children's loyalty.
- Help make the transition from one home to the other smooth and calm.
- Discuss rules and discipline with your former spouse so you are consistent.
- Encourage time-sharing that includes grandparents and extended family.
- Make sure your children have their own places in your home -- even if it is just part of a room -- so they feel it is also their home.

- Help your children meet other kids in your neighborhood so they have friends at both homes.
- Try to keep a routine schedule to help prepare your children for time-sharing.
- Have a checklist of items such as clothing and toys that your children need to take on time-sharing. If the children are old enough, they can help pack.
- If it's appropriate, allow your children to bring friends along occasionally.
- Spend individual time with each of your children.

Show respect for your former spouse and concern for your children.

Continuing conflicts between parents creates tension at the time of exchange and often put the children in the middle. Putting aside past animosity makes time-sharing a much more rewarding experience and allows everyone to get on with their lives while maintaining good parent/child relationships.

- Be on time.
- Inform your former spouse if a new person such as a babysitter or romantic partner will be part of the time-sharing.
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- Inform your former spouse if a new person such as a babysitter or romantic partner will be part of the time-sharing.
- Share changes in your address, home and work phone numbers, and job with your former spouse.
- Each parent is entitled to know where the children are during time-sharing. They should also know if the children are left with other people such as babysitters or friends when the other parent is not there.
- Parents should try to agree on their children's religious education, as well as who is responsible for overseeing it.
- Parents should tell each other their current addresses and home and work phone numbers.
- Both parents should realize that time-sharing schedules may change as children age and their needs change.

Time-sharing Dos

The following suggestions represent strategies parents can use to achieve parenting goals:

- Be flexible about time-sharing schedules.
- Give the other parent advance notice of changes in your schedule.
- Remember to give the other parent your vacation schedule in advance.
- Remember that your children may have plans that could affect your time-sharing schedule.

Make time-sharing a normal part of life.

- Find activities that give you and your children an opportunity to build your relationship.
- Allow time together without planned activities just to "hang out."
- Provide a balance between fun and responsibility for your children.

Time-sharing Don'ts

Some parents use time-sharing to achieve destructive goals. These are goals based on revenge, such as one parent hurting the other or disrupting his or her life. To achieve those goals, parents may use destructive behaviors that can create a more hostile environment and seriously damage relationships. Destructive strategies can be deeply hurtful to children caught in the middle. Following are tips for avoiding destructive behavior:

Don't refuse to communicate with your former spouse.

- Don't use your children to relay divorce-related messages on issues such as child support. Those issues should be discussed by adults only.
 - Don't make your children responsible for making, canceling, or changing time-sharing plans. Those are adult responsibilities.
 - Don't use your children to spy on your former spouse.
 - Don't fight with the other parent during drop-off and pickup times. Deal with important issues when your children cannot overhear.
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Don't disrupt your children's relationship with their other parent.

- Don't make your children feel guilty about spending time with their other parent.
- Don't use time-sharing as a reward for good behavior, and don't withhold it as punishment for poor behavior.
- Don't tell your children you will feel lonely and sad if they visit their other parent.
- Don't withhold time-sharing to punish your former spouse for problems such as missed child support payments. Withholding time-sharing punishes your children, who are not guilty.
- Don't withhold time-sharing because you feel your former spouse doesn't deserve to see the children. Unless a parent is a genuine threat, adults and children need to see each other.
- Don't use false abuse accusations to justify withholding time-sharing.
- Don't let activities such as sports and hobbies interfere with the time your children spend with their other parent. Your former spouse can transport the children to those activities if needed and can sometimes participate.

- Don't pressure your children about leaving clothes or toys at their other parent's home. The children need to feel they belong in both places.
 - Don't falsely claim that your children are sick to justify withholding time-sharing.
 - Don't withhold phone calls to your children from their other parent.
 - Don't put down the other parent's new romantic partner.
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Don't allow your anger to affect your relationship with your children.

- Don't hurt your children by failing to show up for time-sharing or by being late.
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Don't spoil your children to buy their loyalty and love.

- Don't let your children blackmail you by refusing to visit unless you buy them something.
 - Don't try to bribe your children.
 - Don't feel you need to be your children's buddy for time-sharings to be successful. Your children need you to be a parent.
 - Don't try to fill every minute of a visit. Allow some down time for routine activities such as cooking or laundry, or quiet time just to be together.
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All of these time-sharing don'ts undercut children's ability to develop an open and supportive relationship with both parents. One of the best ways to support children involved in a separation or divorce is to do what you can to make time-sharing go smoothly. Focusing on time-sharing dos is a first step in helping children adjust.

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