

DIVORCE Coping with Inconsistent Parental Access

Children develop their sense of self and place in the world through their relationship to their parents. A child's self esteem is built on the notion that, "I am of value as a person to the degree to which my parents take interest in me." Children feel their parents' interest in them by the amount of time spent with them. Many parents talk of *quality* time, but the best indicator of quality is *quantity* and *consistency*. These days when parents speak of quality, they really mean that they do not spend much time with their child, but when they do, they spoil them. This is not good for children. Rather, children need ample and regular attention from both parents in their normal living situations. Let's face it, we only do spend time with people we value and children feel this.

When a parent is not active in a child's life, the child may be emotionally crushed, feeling unworthy. As such, the child may no longer strive to succeed socially, academically and later, economically. Some children may even demonstrate these feelings of unworthiness through disruptive behavior. Alternately, some children develop rich fantasy lives to protect themselves from feelings of worthlessness. They tell themselves their parent must be doing very important things otherwise they would surely be here. Such children grow up with unrealistic views of other people and relationships.

Many custodial parents find themselves in a bind when the non-custodial parent fails to exercise regular access. They feel the pain of their child whose heart may be broken and view them as dying the death of a thousand emotional cuts. They wonder what to tell their children to help them cope, recognizing the impact on their self-worth.

For custodial parents helping their children cope with the absence or inconsistent access of the non-custodial parent, this advice is suggested:

1. Either directly or through another person, tell the non-custodial parent, their relationship to the children is important. Believe it or not, some parents do not fully realize this. They

may have had a similar experience in their upbringing. In bringing this to their attention, you may suggest meeting with a social worker for them to discuss and learn about the importance of their relationship to their children.

2. Remain calm yourself. Do not exhibit your anger or frustration to your children, as this will only escalate their bad feelings. Rather, talk with your children about their feelings. It is appropriate to reassure them that you love them. It is also appropriate to explain that the non-custodial parent's absence is a reflection on difficulties they are having and not a reflection on the children. Be careful here not to bad-mouth the non-custodial parent. When you bad-mouth the non-custodial parent, you bad-mouth your children because they recognize they come from both parents!
3. If you know the non-custodial parent is inconsistent, always have a back-up plan to structure your children's time. This is not to say you spoil them with special attention to compensate for the non-custodial parent's absence though. Rather, children should not be left with nothing to do, otherwise they may wallow in their upset and get disruptive due to bad feelings. It is better that they learn to adapt and use their time constructively.

There is no way to fully protect children from disappointment in life. The key though is to keep the disappointment from being felt as a reflection of their worth. By helping them understand the situation and making sure their time remains structured, you can ease the impact of the situation and teach them appropriate coping skills at the same time. This will equip them to deal with other disappointments that life may throw their way, so they can integrate the experience and then move on to other successes.

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