

## Divorce Recovery

# The Absent Parent Returns, The Active Parent in Turmoil

After parental separation, a consistent relationship between child and both parents is best. A parent entering and leaving a child's life can be disruptive for the child and for the life of the other parent. Some folks may feel that upon being absent for some period of time, the absent parent should not be allowed back into the child's life. In some situations, the active parent has remarried and the new partner has formed a meaningful and significant attachment to the child. The re-introduction of the absent parent therefore threatens to not only cause emotional turmoil to the child, but may be a perceived threat to the relationship between child and new partner. Needless-to-say, there can be a tangle of intense feelings on all sides.

Generally speaking, the social science literature supports the notion that children fare better in the long run with secure attachments to both parents. This is true even in the face of many parental difficulties, but assuming that neither parent is outright abusive. In the case of an absent parent wanting to re-enter a child's life, it may be difficult to determine what is best for the child. Hence the decision may rest upon the clinical judgment of an counselor/assessor. The challenge in assessing these cases is separating parental issues of anger, jealousy and the like, from the needs and interests of the child. At times it is parental issues that require more management than the child's renewed relationship with the absent parent.

In the event it appears that the relationship between child and absent parent will be re-established, certain precautions and structures can be put in place to allay concerns, facilitate the process and provide safeguards. Pre-meeting conditions can include:

1. Abstinence from alcohol or drugs where a parent is known to abuse such substances.
2. Drug testing for a parent known to abuse drugs.
3. Counseling for the above, if at issue.
4. Counseling directed at anger management if anger issues are identified.
5. Consulting with a Family Counselor in reference to parenting skills.

Then, with regard to a process for facilitating the relationship between the absent parent and child:

1. Consider a counseling process where the counselor meets the absent parent alone. This meeting or series of meetings is to establish motive and also to provide opportunity for education as to the needs of the child in question.
2. Concurrently there should be a meeting or series of meetings with the same counselor and the active parent and partner to discuss and prepare them, followed by a meeting with the child to discuss concerns and issues. The purpose of counseling is not to curtail the process, but to continue to discuss and develop strategies to manage change in view of concerns.
3. Finally, the child meets with the absent parent under the auspices of the counselor. Several future meetings can occur with the counselor or under supervision through a designated supervision center if considered necessary.
4. Then assuming all goes well, visits can progress to unsupervised.

Hence the issue may not be withholding the relationship, but facilitating it through a safe and structured process. If the absent parent abides by the process, benefits to the child can significantly outweigh the loss of this parent-child relationship. If the absent parent proves incapable of meeting the requirements and abiding by the safeguards, then there are supports in place to help the child and family adjust. If the absent parent refuses to follow the process or gets into trouble along the way, the process can be modified or even ended. These situations are balancing acts with no easy solution. The challenge is to manage the process as delicately as possible. The above process may help.

Tell your friends with this problem that they can consult with Lew Bigler before they consider legal action or decisions to deny the child his or her parent. Give them my business card and ask if you can ask me to give them a call.

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