

Parenting from a Distance

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Parenting from a distance can be challenging but not impossible. This NebGuide discusses ways parents can stay connected with their children when they live apart.

Long-Distance Parenting

Parenting is never easy, even when the parent and child live in the same household. When a parent is parenting a child who doesn't live in the home full time, it can be especially challenging, but not impossible. It actually can be an opportunity to create new ways to communicate.

Long-distance parenting is usually defined by the number of miles traveled one way by the child for *visitation*, hereafter referred to as parenting time. The standard in most states is 180 miles one way. That is a long distance for children to travel between parents who may be in high conflict. However, traveling short distances between homes in the same town or neighboring towns can still present special challenges.

Whether the parent moves across town, across the state, country, or world, it signals the end of the *family* pattern as every member of the family has known family to be. This adjustment in itself takes awhile for the brain and the heart to process. Knowing that staying connected is in the best interest of the child, neither parent should deny the importance of making a working parenting plan that includes regular phone contact and parenting time in the home of both parents. Cognitively, most parents know not to put the child in the middle. But because emotions rule many of divorcing families' decisions, children do get caught in the middle, and physical parenting time becomes a bigger challenge when distance is a factor.

Research on early childhood has underscored the impact of the first five years of a child's life on her/his social-emotional development. Negative early experiences can impair children's mental health and affect their cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional development. Therefore, it makes great sense to create a parenting plan that will include parenting time for parents and children in the least restrictive environment.

Here are some tips:

- Call or contact the other parent, keeping the child out of the middle.
- Use business-like skills to talk to the other parent.

Parenting Plans

A parenting plan is a written agreement developed by separating or divorcing parents to provide a method to share parenting that serves the best interests of the children. Most states require submission of a parenting plan to the court before a final divorce decree can be granted.

The parenting plan includes a statement of custody, including residences, a division of parenting time, rules for transitioning between homes, plans for out-of-school time, child care, religious training, school events, and holidays. Often included is the date and time of the week when the noncustodial parent can call the child. In some families, there is no standard time for communication.

As long as the communication is truly for the purpose of reassuring the child of parental love and care, communication should not be restricted. High conflict parents may use children manipulatively to stalk or aggravate the other parent by using the child as a messenger. Parents should remember that they are the best and most important teachers for their children. Children are always watching their parents. They learn to react or respond the same way as their parents behave in conflict or chaos. Parents should model respectful behavior for communication and resolving conflict.

- Stick to the issue at hand — don't drag in other topics.
- Use *I* statements ("I am frustrated when you are late").
- Avoid *You* statements ("You are always late!").
- Arrange for transitions in a neutral location to avoid conflict.
- If a conflict begins, take a deep breath and make an appointment to discuss the issues at a calmer time.

Staying Attached Is Important

Attachment is one of the first things we learn about our new world after birth. Who will meet our needs? How well will they meet our needs? A child's mother is most commonly

suggested as the primary caregiver and the person with whom the child will have the strongest bond. This does not exclude the father as a primary caregiver! However, many times the father feels that his role is not as important as that of the mother. Divorcing fathers of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and adolescents are needed to be significant caregivers in the lives of their children. They should stay connected in person, by phone, text, social network, or mail. The future socio-emotional growth of the child depends on it.

Our brain records our social memories. Even though babies can't name various caregivers or their relationship to them, they know who provides the best care. Children who feel confident that the bond with both mother and father is strong and that both parents are emotionally available to them exhibit greater readiness for school and new experiences even if they live in two different homes.

The attachment that parents provide for their children will follow them through life. This attachment will be exhibited with friends, dating partners, spouses, and their children. Part of parenting is to help the child learn that a strong attachment to both parents is positive and non-threatening. Parents should not feel that they will be less important to the child if they allow the other parent to have quality parenting time and communication on a regular basis. Consistency is important for the well-being of a child's social-emotional and mental health. A child will respect a parent for allowing a loyal relationship with the other parent and will thank that parent for not making alienating comments.

Positive Anticipation

Remember feeling anxious to visit a favorite grandma or other relative? What made that time so special? What caused anticipation of the visit? Cash in on those memories and try to create that experience for the child.

The child may feel the **noncustodial** home is boring. It doesn't feel like **home**.

The noncustodial parent may misinterpret this attitude to mean, "I don't have enough neat stuff to keep my child happy." Rarely is this the message that the child is sending. A simple question to clarify the child's feelings would be, "What would make this house feel more inviting or homey for you, more like your house?"

Children usually wish for significant time together with a parent instead of material things. Time together in quantity and quality is one of the Six Qualities of Strong Families as identified by John DeFrain, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Family and Community Development specialist. Even families of divorce can be strong families and benefit from such interactive times. If decorating fits the parent's budget and do-it-yourself skills, dream up an area or a room in that home in which the parent and child can create the child's own space.

Positive Anticipation means planning future activities with children so they look forward to parenting time with the parent who lives at a distance. Set a goal for some future event and problem-solve during each visit to meet that goal. Kids will gain a sense of control over the visit while practicing problem-solving. They will anticipate the next visit.

Examples of Positive Anticipation

Plan a camping trip together. Phone calls, e-mails, and weekend visits can provide time to plan a pretty incredible summer camping trip or even a three-day weekend. Perhaps the goal will be a sporting event, a rock concert, or the car trip itself. Build the excitement by planning how to reach the goal together. Make it a team effort. Start a change jar to teach your child to budget for special events and call it the anticipation jar.

Custodial parents can make or break the mood of positive anticipation. To prevent the spill-over of parental anger, jealousy, and revenge, both parents should work out the details as needed, and the custodial parent should honor the child by just listening to their anticipation to be with the other parent, who also loves the child.

Keeping Connected

Telephone

With the popularity of cell phones, most children can have immediate phone contact with a parent. This is a great way to stay in touch every day without disrupting the child's routine. A short phone call after school or before bedtime can be a great comfort for a child who can't spend face-to-face time with a parent every day. With cameras on some phones, it is easy to send a photo to enjoy or make a video.

Mail

Children love to get cards in the mail. Just sending a "thinking of you" card or a "thanks for a great weekend" note will make both the parent and child feel like they are still enjoying the weekend's fun.

Instant Messaging

Kids are savvy about social networks. Have them show the parent how to use instant messaging. This also gives parents a chance to monitor their activity. Teens and parents can be "friends" on social networks. Use instant messaging to chat. Webcams are a relatively inexpensive addition to a computer. It is close to being face-to-face and can be comforting to children lonesome for a parent.

Skype

This is a *Voice Over Internet Protocol* program that can be downloaded for free or low cost so a parent and child can talk voice to voice over the computer. This saves cell phone minutes and provides quality time together. If a parent has a microphone, speakers, and a webcam, he or she is pretty close to *being there* with the child.

Text Messages

Parents can be text savvy in no time at all with their child teaching them how to do it! Teaching Mom/Dad to text is positive anticipation! Be sure not to use this medium as a way to send messages of alienation about the other parent. Never use this method to express anger to a child.

Movies

Send the child a ticket or tickets for an age-appropriate movie. Go see the same movie and then talk about it on a social networking site. Renting a movie can achieve the same end result for much less money.

Movie Maker

Most computers have some application for making movies. If not, parents can download programs for free from the Internet. How about writing a story together with photos and saving it in the movie format? It will last forever. Favorite music clips can be added to the movie.

Scrapbooking

Make an online scrapbook at various photo sites such as Snapfish, Kodak, or Shutterfly®. This is a great project to work on during parenting time, and then both the parents and child can enjoy it until they are together again.

Resources

Deena L. Stacer, M.A., Team Works, Mesa, AZ.
National Center for Children in Poverty. New York.

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