

Child Development and Parents Who Don't Live Together

In general,

1. Children need residential arrangements that A) are specific and predictable, B) keep them out of the middle of their parents' conflict, C) keep changes to a minimum, and D) allow for healthy relationships with each parent.
2. SPECIFIC AND PREDICTABLE schedules encourage more time with each parent and eliminate some parental conflict.
3. HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS requires parents to share their worries, fears, and concerns with adult support people and NEVER their children. Healthy relationships happen when parents reassure their children instead of allowing children to be in the role of reassuring their parents. Children should NEVER be the "best friend" of a parent.
4. UNRESOLVED CONFLICT harms children. When parents are cooperating together for their children's needs, almost any schedule will work. Schedules which work well for children whose parents cooperate together do not automatically work well for children whose parents cannot agree. Children become very stressed and get stuck in the middle of conflict whenever parents:
 1. ask children to give messages to the other parent, or
 2. ask children about the personal life of the other parent, or
 3. criticize or cut down the other parent to the children, or
 4. are hurt or jealous when children enjoy or miss the other parent, or
 5. discuss with children their problems and hurts from the marriage, or
 6. treat the other parent with hostility and threats around the children.
5. Every child is unique and has individual needs. Parents must consider their children as individuals when fashioning shared parenting arrangements. Children with "fussy" or "difficult" temperaments are more vulnerable to life changes and stress and may need more help adjusting to divorce.
6. Parenting often involves putting the parent's needs second.

7. Children whose parents have been away (perhaps in the military or because of job requirements), need to build trust gradually and get to know the parent before jumping into a regular shared parenting schedule.
8. Using this information to fuel a custody conflict is a misuse of the information. Conflict about custody is harmful to children and may indicate one or both parents are unable to put their children's needs before parents' desires.

Infants (0 – 12 months old)

Infants have limited memory and are beginning to recognize caregivers. Because bonding involves all of the senses, the physical presence of a parent rather than just hearing their voice is important. Attachment between a parent and infant emerges during the second six months of the infant's life and continues to develop during early childhood. Children form an attachment through a gradual process of having basic needs met by someone who feeds them when they are hungry, changes them when they are wet, comforts them when they are upset, talks to them, plays with them, cuddles, rocks, and who comes when they cry. Infants begin to trust their needs will be met and that the world is a safe place. They form attachments to caregivers who satisfy their needs and soothe their discomfort and fears. Children can develop multiple attachments to caregivers.

Infants this young have limited memories and need frequent contact with parents—daily for an hour or so, if possible. The younger the child, the more frequent the contacts need to be with shorter durations. Predictable patterns of contact and familiarity is important—same location every time, if possible. Frequent and shorter contacts can help attachment and are much better than longer times spaced far apart. The more frequently the parent is available, the longer the contact can be. It is hard for infants to tolerate long times if they only see the parent once or twice a week. Also, take care not to disrupt the attachment of the parent living with the infant. Overnight away should probably not occur until older.

Infants need smooth routines and to be away from emotional upset of parents. They need sensitive and cooperative interactions with caregivers. When parents are in conflict, reduce frequency of contact between parents to protect infant.

Toddlers (12 – 36 months old)

In addition to building attachment and forming trust, toddlers begin to develop sense of self and the ability to use familiar objects and toys for comforting self. This means the child is beginning to feel safe and comfortable in the world away from a primary caregiver for short periods. Comfort for toddlers comes from having a strong connection to caregivers who meet basic needs and respond to the toddler in warm and predictable ways. Toddlers will check back frequently to see if the primary caregiver is still there for them.

The loss of a primary caregiver and the loss of a familiar and comfortable environment are the most deep seated fears the toddler has. Two and three year old's may have trouble handling divorce because of their huge fears of losing a caregiver. Expect normal separation anxiety to be exaggerated. Parents underestimate the ability of two and three year old's to use information about what is going on around them. Parents should tell toddlers about what happened to the absent parent and why, in ways they can understand.

A regular, frequent schedule is of major importance. Short times of 1-3 hours are recommended if frequency is low. If contact is regular and frequent, the child can handle most of a day. Toddlers need predictability and familiarity and contact works best when in familiar places every time.

Toddlers have better memory, so they can go longer periods of time without seeing a parent, but routine and frequency are still important. Toddlers struggle to figure out that someone out of sight can and will return, so it is hard for them to cope with long times away from a primary caregiver. Many three year old's tolerate overnights OK, but weekends or long times during summer are hard.

Preschoolers (3 – 5 years old)

Preschoolers are learning to talk and can talk about their feelings and needs. They are learning to control their emotions and bodily functions and are beginning to understand what tomorrow is. These children can now hold in mind a picture of a comforting parent when away from him or her and so they can usually tolerate separation from their parents and caregivers. As they become more independent, they wonder if they still will be loved if they oppose a parent's will. The primary fear is of losing parental love.

Children are strongly affected by interparental conflict. Children who are distressed during the transition but are OK within 30 minutes, may be responding to their parents' tension instead of their own. They need each parent's permission to love and enjoy being with the other parent. They need honest and frequent comforting from parents because they feel huge worries about being abandoned.

Pre-schoolers are bewildered about the separation and often use fantasy as a coping skill. They fantasize about their parents being together and may deny the divorce has happened. Children this age often assume it is their unlovability that caused the separation and they feel guilty. Besides intense fear of abandonment, children worry about food, shelter, and seeing the other parent. They may reach out randomly for nurturing or cling to parents and appear emotionally needy.

School age (6 – 8 years old)

At about age 6, guilt begins to develop and realizing others have feelings first starts. Children learn to make friends, get along with teachers, use moral judgement, have greater self-control of impulses, and feel they are competent. They have a better sense of time and can understand a schedule alternating from one home to the other.

As empathy develops, children are very sensitive to subtle pressures and loyalty conflicts between parents. They may believe they are being disloyal to one parent when they love and enjoy being with the other parent. They fear the loss of a parent. As moral judgement develops, children have difficulty understanding people can be both good and bad. Children this age have difficulty not going along with their parents' wishes and may blame themselves for the break-up. They may tell each parent they want to live with that parent. Although fewer children this age believe they caused the divorce, many actively try trickery, illness, or accidents to get their parents together again.

At about ages 7-8, there is a major shift in thinking ability which helps children to understand cause and effect better and thinking about the future and "forever." Reducing changes is especially critical for children this age. They need to grieve. Children who don't resolve this grief can become very depressed. Children are more likely to grieve if their parents grieve, so don't hide your own feelings of sadness about the divorce. This is not to say children should be overwhelmed by a sense of their parent's sadness, because they need to know someone is in control and their needs will be met. Children this age need regular, frequent contact with each parent, shielding from parental hostility, involvement of both parents in a child's life, and regular school attendance. The schedule should allow the child to maintain contact with friends, school, and after-school activities. Many children still require a home base while being with other parent from 1 – 3 days/week. Some children can tolerate alternating half-weeks at each parent's home. Multiple overnights are usually OK and a full week at each parent's home can usually be phased in by age 8.

Children should be encouraged NOT to carry information back and forth between homes and to talk directly with each parent about rules in that household.

School age (9 – 12 years old)

At these ages, children develop skills in school academics, sports, and community activities. They get to know themselves better and can evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses as compared to others.

Children this age are able to join in discussions and have a grasp of adult issues including divorce. Commonly, 9-12 year old's demand explanation. Give them basic information, but no details of unhappiness or actions of parents. Children this age are able to genuinely empathize with their parents' attitudes, feelings, and reason for divorce. The child can see the world from someone else's point of view. This leads to concern and caring about the parent's pain and can lead to the child taking care of the parent.

Children this age are also very idealistic and are starting to have moral judgements. Children this age can have relationships on an equal basis with each parent. In a divorce situation, a child's idealism can easily produce a sense of rage. This rage is frequently directed at the parent whose behavior the child decides is at odds with his/her own sense of standards and therefore (in the child's mind) is to blame for the break-up of the family.

Because children this age are capable of empathy, parents should use someone else for talking about their problems, daily difficulties, or the loneliness of the nights. While children of divorce may be given more responsibility to help the family cope with the amount of work, parents should take care to avoid burdening the child to the point of eliminating play.

Children benefit when parents are able to reduce life changes for the child and reduce conflict between the parents. It is especially important for parents to maintain a regular and predictable contact with the child, even if the child is intensely angry at the parent. They need parents to avoid blaming each other and to be honest.

Children this age need involvement of both parents and are most content with several contacts a week with each parent. The schedule should be regular and predictable and minimize interference with peer relationships, school, and after-school activities. Many children desire one home base with specific evenings, weekends, and activities at the other home. Some children do well with equal contact in each home. Some children prefer less contact, may be every other week. At this age, children need more flexibility.

Teenagers (13 – 17 years old)

Younger teens are figuring out who they are in relation to friends' and society's rules. Middle teens focus on how they think and feel about themselves. They develop a sense of purpose, clarify long-term plans and values and have a growing sense of who one really is and where one is headed. Older teens are focused on taking increased responsibility for what they do and who they are. Teens also learn intimacy, which allows for openness, honesty, self-disclosure, and trust in relationships.

Teens need parents' permission for independence and encouragement for taking responsibility. They need parents to provide closeness, concern, and fairness. From age 12, children are usually able to understand the divorce process and separate themselves from their parents' actions and reactions. Teens are capable of forming an independent opinion about where and with whom they want to live. This opinion should be considered but not necessarily followed. Some teens pick the parent who leaves as the enemy and some blame the remaining parent for not being lovable or supportive enough.

Teens often act as though they can handle anything and that divorce is no big deal. Teens are the last to admit being needy and act as if they don't care what their parents do. A stance of fierce independence is likely to mislead parents into believing that the teen needs less support than is actually the case.

Teens do well when both parents stay involved with them, when parents don't start acting like teens, when parents don't involve teens in parent worries, and don't expose teens to parents' sexuality. Teens need protection, a lot of encouragement, recognition of real and honest effort, and a sense they are lovable as they are — not for what they do. It is important that parents not handle their own guilt by becoming extra permissive toward their children. Remind teens a variety of behaviors for adults are not acceptable for teens.

Teens need some say in planning the schedule. Teens do not need contact of long duration with either parent and flexibility in shared parenting is required. Contact once or twice each week for an hour or more may be enough. Some teens need one home base with regular and predictable evenings, weekends, and activities at the other home. Some teens prefer a more equal basis with each parent. Maintain accessibility to school, peers, after-school, and community involvements from both homes.

A teen who has primarily lived with one parent commonly wants to move in with the other parent. It is also common for a teen who has gone back and forth between homes to desire one home base.

My children are fine...if they were stressed I would know

School Age (6 – 8 years old) — red flags for parents

- intense sadness and despair — doesn't smile or laugh
- fear about the future — secretive
- more irritable, restless, whiny, anxious
- physical pains — headaches, stomachaches
- angry, aggressive, or temper tantrums
- misbehaves at school or grades slip
- difficulty with small changes in routine
- problems making and keeping friends
- stealing or lying

School Age (9 – 12 years old) — red flags for parents

- extreme anger at a parent
- takes on adult responsibility at home
- tries to take care of or "be there" for a parent
- physical pains — headaches, stomachaches
- becoming overactive in school or grades slip
- resentment — won't communicate

- fear about the future — secretive
- problems making and keeping friends
- tries alcohol or drugs or cigarettes

Teenagers (13 – 17 years old) — red flags for parents

- extreme anger at a parent
- over closeness to a parent
- competition with a parent
- chronic fatigue or difficulty concentrating
- becoming overactive in school, sports, music, clubs, work
- problems at school or drop in grades or dropping out
- sexually active
- extreme independence or refusal of support
- problems making and keeping friends
- uses alcohol or drugs or cigarettes
- moody and depressed
- violent

My children are stressed out...What can I do?

Infants (0 – 12 months old)

- keep infants away from emotional upset of parents
- predictable pattern of contact with parents
- familiar places — same location each time with parent
- smooth routines — especially naps, bedtimes, and meals
- consider no overnights until signs of stress disappear
- more frequent contact with parent if conflict is low
- warm and affectionate child care person
- lots of colors, shapes for child to see and hear
- be more aware of how infants are feeling

Toddlers (12 – 36 months old)

- shield children from conflict between parents

- predictable routine of schedule with both parents
- frequent contact with both parents if conflict is low
- if frequency is low, short times of 1 – 3 hours
- familiar places — same location each time with parent
- smooth routines — especially naps, bedtimes, and meals
- consider no overnights for a while
- consider fewer transitions between homes for a while
- warm and affectionate child care person
- explain that mommy and daddy both love the child even though mommy and daddy live in two places
- be a broken record because their memory doesn't work well
- stimulating environment for child

Pre-schoolers (3 – 5 years old)

- shield children from conflict between parents
- predictable routine of schedule with both parents
- frequent contact with both parents if conflict is low
- familiar places — same location each time with parent
- consider fewer or no overnights for a while
- consider fewer transitions between homes for a while
- warm and affectionate child care person
- explain that mommy and daddy both love the child even though mommy and daddy live in two places
- give permission for child to love other parent
- explain the child is lovable and did nothing to cause the problems between mommy and daddy
- be a broken record because their memory doesn't work well

School Age (6 – 8 years old)

- shield children from conflict between parents
- predictable routine schedule with both parents

- show children how to grieve, what to do about sadness
- reduce changes in the life of the child
- both parents be involved in child's school and sports
- encourage contact with child's friends
- give convincing permission for child to love other parent
- don't let child be messenger between parents
- don't listen to child complain about other parent
- tell child to talk directly with other parent
- don't say negative things about other parent

School Age (9 – 12 years old)

- shield children from conflict between parents
- predictable schedule with both parents
- show children what to do about anger
- reduce changes in the life of the child
- both parents be involved in child's school and sports
- don't burden the child with adult problems or loneliness
- don't burden the child with too many chores at home
- don't let child be messenger between parents
- don't listen to child complain about other parent
- tell child to talk directly with other parent
- don't say negative things about other parent

Teenagers (13 – 17 years old)

- shield teens from conflict between parents
- give teens some say in schedule with parents
- predictable schedule with both parents with flexibility
- show teens what to do with anger
- both parents be involved in teen's school and sports
- don't discuss problems or worries with teens
- don't discuss parent's dating or sexuality with teens

- don't put teens in charge of younger siblings daily
- don't let teens be messengers between parents
- don't listen to teens complain about the other parent
- don't say negative things about other parent
- don't be too overmissive

Love and Care for your Children — Nurturing Children Provide Emotional Security

- talk and act so that children feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves
- be gentle
- be dependable

Provide Physical Security

- provide food, shelter, clothing
- teach personal hygiene and nutrition
- monitor safety
- maintain a family routine
- attend to wounds

Provide Discipline

- be consistent
- ensure rules are appropriate to age and development of child
- be clear about limits and expectations
- use discipline to give instruction, not punish

Give Time

- participate in your children's lives: activities, school, sports, special events and days, celebrations, friends
- include your children in your activities
- reveal who you are to your children

Encourage and Support

- be affirming
- encourage children to follow their interests

- let children disagree with you
- recognize improvement
- teach new skills
- let them make mistakes

Give Affection

- express verbal and physical affection
- be affectionate when your children are physically or emotionally hurt

Care for Yourself

- give yourself personal time
- keep yourself healthy
- maintain friendships
- accept love

Trust and Respect

- acknowledge children's right to have own feelings, friends, activities, and opinions
- promote independence
- allow for privacy
- respect feelings for other parent
- believe your children

Sources:

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