

Part-Time Parenting

If you're now a part-time parent, you may be tempted to fill your kids' visits with big-ticket entertainment to assuage feelings of guilt and insecurity. But what do they really want from you?

By Gregory Reid

The non-custodial or part-time parent faces many challenges that aren't the norm in a dual-parent family. These hardly need itemizing; any of you can identify with the strains of not seeing your children for several days at a time, and then facing an almost overwhelming few days of intensive time with them, followed by days of missing them all over again.

But when you stop to think about it, single parenthood can also bring with it a number of possible advantages -- both to you and to your children. When parents split, kids may feel that they've "gained a parent" who previously seemed forever too busy to spend quality time with them. Many single dads we talked to agreed that they actually feel closer to their children now, and that they believe their children feel the same bond. Without the kids at home every day of the week, single parents feel more at ease in putting in extra hours at work, thereby relieving the stress of "falling behind," and therefore making it possible to dedicate 100% of their time with the children to the children.

The Disneyland parent

You likely feel some remorse at not seeing your kids often enough, so it's perfectly understandable that you feel and act upon the need to jam-pack their short visits with you into a do-it-all-non-stop entertainment extravaganza, otherwise known as the "Disneyland Dad Syndrome." DDS (or more rarely, but gender-equally, DMS) can strike even the most "I'll never spoil my children" parents, almost without warning. Of course DDS doesn't have to involve Disney per se; a new pony or dirtbike or any number of other big-ticket items will suffice. Still, I must admit that my own three kids will be quick to show you their Mickey-Mouse ears from our trip a couple of years ago (shortly after my separation) -- and I'll never spoil my kids!

The basics first

The dilemma is that, although your kids may insist that what they want most of all from you is , it's not likely what they'll remember in ten or twenty years. What they will remember is that you attended their school play, or read stories to them before tucking them in at night, or brought them to the doctor's office when they fell and scraped their knees. In short, it's all of the "real life" day-to-day living stuff that long-term childhood memories and warm feelings are made of -- *not* the expensive trip to you-know-where.

This isn't to say that offering gifts or interesting travel to your kids is necessarily a bad thing -- especially if these items can be honestly viewed as educational. If money, time, and your ex-spouse permit, you could plan a spring break in Mexico, for instance. Before the trip, spend time with your kids researching the history and culture of the place, as well as interesting things to do and see while you're there. You could also get an audio cassette offering "Spanish for Travelers" and make a game of learning a few words of a foreign language.

The experts agree, however, that the frill items shouldn't be your first priority in your new relationship with your children. Your first need is to establish an excellent rapport with them, and doing so is virtually impossible in a whirlwind entertainment weekend.

Kids really like to "just hang" with their parents, doing simple errands or assisting with dinner, feeling that they're helping out, chatting about important stuff and pure nonsense; feeling a bond with their dad and mom. "Your time and your emotional availability are most important to your child," says Gary Neuman, author of *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. "The Disney World trip can be a wonderful experience, but an hour with you at the local duck pond can bring the same delighted smiles. Of course, kids want and need to feel special. But does your child feel special at Disney World because he's one of millions of visitors or because you're there with him? Giving to our children of our time and ourselves makes being a parent a wondrous, enlightening experience."

Successful co-parenting

If you're considering a vacation or major purchase for your child(ren), you should first discuss it with your ex. If you can agree that the proposed trip or item is something you would have done as a couple (in your better days together), then it's a reasonable thing to plan as a single parent.

There may be all sorts of reasons why your ex may not agree with you on a particular plan, and these reasons might not be entirely unbiased. Your ex might feel a great deal of resentment that you're able to afford "such a luxury" when he or she is struggling just to make ends meet. Each situation is unique, and in the end you'll have to make your own decision, but at least you must ask for and seriously consider the other parent's concerns.

Child psychologist Philippe Barrette suggests that you "always look at things through the child's eyes. Never place a child in a position of feeling pulled between parents, or of having to choose one over the other." While a new set of ski equipment (for example) wouldn't under normal circumstances be the basis of such a tug-of-war situation, it could be made disruptive, either intentionally or unintentionally, if the other parent can't provide a similar gift.

If you've always been seen by your children as handing out presents while your ex is handing out discipline, it may make you feel good, but it's not a balanced or healthy situation for the children. It can also put your former partner in a compromising position, says Alan Frankel, a New York-area psychotherapist and divorce mediator. "The custodial parent feels like they always have to do all of the hard work while the other parent has non-stop fun with the kids," he points out.

Receiving gifts for no apparent reason can actually be a problem for your kids -- they may wonder whether you are trying to bribe them or buy their love. "Children with divorced parents are prone to wonder about the purpose of gift giving, especially if it is unexpected and 'undeserved'," note Jennifer Lewis, M.D., and William Sammons, M.D., in *Don't Divorce Your Children: Children and Their Parents Talk About Divorce*. "Children do not want gifts as substitutes for time together, [or] gifts without an apology if used as a way to assuage your guilt. They do not want gifts that will upset the other parent -- the bike Mom was going to get them, the skiis Dads has been saving up for." The bottom line is that your children want the gifts of time, reliability, and affection from you -- and these gifts are irreplaceable.

Be consistent

Another strong need for kids is consistency in their relationship with you -- and with their other parent, of course. Try to reach an agreement with your ex on such things as unacceptable behavior (e.g. use of profanity), rules, boundaries, and discipline. If you and your ex can't agree, at least make sure that during each visit you're consistent: "no" always means "no"; good behavior is rewarded and bad punished in pretty much the same way each time and for each child.

As much as possible, you should try to do things in their community, even if that means some extra travel or inconvenience for you. And you should try to keep things as "normal" as they were before your separation. Taking your son to his piano lesson might seem like just about the worst way you could spend your precious time with him, but it's something he'll appreciate and remember you for.

There's also a lot that the non-custodial parent can do to get involved with the school, says Dr. Lois Nightengale, a clinical psychologist and the author of *My Parents Still Love Me Even Though They're Getting Divorced*: "Make a special parent-teacher appointment with the teacher each semester," she says. "Ask if you can drive on the field trips. Be known at the school so that you know what's going on." Ask your child's school to mail copies of the calendar and report cards to both parents to keep you "in the loop."

Keep the lines open It's also important to your children to know that they can talk to you whenever they want; that you'll be there for them when they need you or want to tell you something special -- like getting an "A" in math. "You don't have to have anything brilliant to say," says Frankel. "Just talk to them about how they're doing -- how their day was." Set up some good times for your kids to call you, and arrange to call them at least once a week. And if you promised to call at 7 p.m. every Wednesday, then you'd darned well better call at 7 p.m. sharp every Wednesday, or have called in advance to explain why this week's schedule had to be changed.

Keep a calendar

Elizabeth Hickey -- family counselor, mediator, and co-author of *Healing Hearts: Helping Adults and Children Recover from Divorce* -- suggests that you and your ex keep identical calendars visible, "indicating which days the child will spend at which home throughout the month." She suggests that a color scheme be used for younger children (e.g. pink for Mom's days and blue for Dad's), and that "both parents should agree to implement a daily routine of looking at the calendar with the child, checking off the day that has passed, and noting when a change to the other parent's home will occur."

Hickey reminds us that young kids may not understand the concept of time, and "will find it reassuring to 'see' when they'll be with each parent. Both you and your children will appreciate the quick reference while making plans throughout the month," she adds.

Set aside space for kids

If your new living arrangements permit it, you should set aside rooms and/or shelves and/or play areas for your children. Help them to decorate their areas as they wish (within reason), and give them a place to keep their stuff safe and sound between visits. Continuity and consistency are the key words here; your children should feel that they're at "their other home" instead of "dad's place." As they mature and gain mobility, they will want to visit you, while feeling comfortable in their familiar surroundings.

If your current living quarters simply can't accommodate your children's visits, then it's virtually impossible to create the ideal sort of predictable and consistent environment outlined above. Still, you can coordinate with your ex to take Brian to hockey every Saturday, and Suzie to ballet. Choose the same hotel (if it suits your needs) for several consecutive stays. (You may even be able to negotiate a reduced rate with the manager, if you explain your circumstances and that you plan to stay there for several weekends.)

Most people have heard of a very hip friend of a friend who has worked out an arrangement with his or her ex where the kids stay in the same house, while the parents alternate between living in the house with the kids or in their shared apartment. If you're so amicably separated to be able to pull this off without major stress between you (e.g., without arguing about the dirty dishes left in the sink, or that mysterious cigarette hole in the good carpet), then this could be the ideal situation for your kids. But don't go into such an arrangement lightly; it'll be extremely difficult to maintain on an ongoing basis, and could easily lead to the end of that terrifically amicable relationship that you've enjoyed so far. If possible, try to track down that friend of your friend for their firsthand experiences and advice.

Special situations

If your separation/divorce has been hostile, you'll be facing special challenges in maintaining a close relationship with your children. This is where negotiating a very detailed parenting agreement as part of your separation agreement is of utmost importance. The agreement should spell out exactly when phone calls will be exchanged, that letters will be written and delivered according to a specific schedule (once each week, for instance), and that fax requests to-and-fro will be honored.

Isolina Ricci, Ph.D., the author of *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child* suggests that you start to think of your ex as a business partner: your partner in parenting. "Try thinking of your parenting relationship in this way. You and the children's other parent are just starting to do business together. Each of you must earn a good name for yourself," Dr. Ricci points out. "The better you get at having a business relationship with your partner in parenting, the better your children will do. It is a simple and as difficult as that."

You may also want or need to arrange for a "neutral ground" place to pick up and drop off the children and perhaps a "neutral person," too. Fifty years ago, in our relatively more close-knit society, a nearby parent or grandparent could be called upon for this role. But in today's more insular and geographically scattered society, there's often not a nearby and willing relative. So for many separated parents, day-care centers have become the obvious spot for "holding" kids for pick up and drop off. Parents can also create a neutral period of time to help children adjust by picking them up at school at the end of the day on Friday and taking them back to school first thing Monday morning.

Another sticky situation is what to do if your child has badly misbehaved shortly before your pickup time. If it weren't for your visit with them, your ex would be grounding them for the day. Dr. Barrette recommends that bad behavior in one house bears the consequences in that house -- but the punishment should never be at the expense of the other parent. In our example, the child should be grounded by your ex upon the child's return.

Under no circumstance should you discuss (except to reinforce) your ex's authority or parenting style through your children! Talk to your ex directly and privately; never use a child (no matter what age) as a "sounding board" or "messenger." "Children should not be the recipients of any residual anger you have towards the other parent," says Dr. Nightengale. "If you have anger, go vent it with a friend, or see a therapist."

Free advice is often worth every penny

As a two-parent household, you were able to bounce ideas off your spouse, such as "what shall we do about Billy's swearing?" and hopefully come to a reasonable solution -- often a better solution than you might have come up with yourself. Now that you're single parenting, Dr. Barrette warns that "you'll likely be offered all sorts of free advice on what you're doing wrong and how to fix it." The advice often comes from well-meaning friends or relatives, concerned with helping you raise the children.

As with most everything offered free, some of this advice might be good, but some might be bad, and you shouldn't feel obliged to heed it -- but of course you shouldn't be rude to the kindly people offering it. Ideally, you'll carefully consider and discuss any questionable advice with the other parent, and get the opinion of one or more professionals if necessary.

Use common sense

Part-time parenting is mostly a matter of putting your good common sense into practice: doing all things in moderation; reaching an appropriate balance of discipline and freedom, between homework or errands and pure playtime; and helping to instill your values in your children through example.

When deciding what to do with your kids, resist the urge to be their entertainment director. Consult with each of them, perhaps during your Wednesday phone-call, about what they want to do, and then try to work out a compromise for all involved -- while guided by your common-sense bounds of normalcy. Of course you'll also need to stay within your budget, and make sure that the plan is age-appropriate.

As a general rule of thumb, experts agree that younger children (ten and under) tend to prefer frequent visits with their "other" parent, even if this means that each visit is short, whereas children over ten prefer longer visits (e.g. of several days), even if that means that the visits are less frequent.

Whenever possible, you should consider these preferences as you schedule your time with your kids and with your ex. For example, a two-week-long camping trip with your teenagers in the summer holidays would likely be terrific for them and for you. (Of course, get their well-formed opinions before booking the campsite!) And at any age, being there for their birthday if at all possible scores high on the bonding scale.

Gregory Reid, a reformed Disneyland dad, is the father of three happy pre-teens who divide their time between him and his ex-wife, who lives in another city.