

Sleep over in Divorce

Although it's important for both parents to maintain a relationship with their children, visitation schedules based simply on dividing up the number of days in a calendar year without regard for the children's age, psychological needs, or temperament can cause unnecessary stress; for very young children, ignoring these factors may cause permanent psychological harm.



For most children, the ability to make transitions from place to place increases with age. For time-sharing to work, both parents must be attuned to their children's unique requirements and needs, as well as the general developmental pattern that most children follow from birth through the teen years.

Infancy to Two-and-a-Half Years

Infancy, psychologists agree, is a time for building an attachment to the primary caretaker. (Attachment to two primary caretakers, a mother and father, is increasingly common, too.) The infant's developmental task is to form trust in the environment. Long separations from the primary caretaker can result in symptoms of depression and regression and later may result in problems with separation and the ability to form relationships.



Alert

If your very young child is grieving for the other parent, he will not be able to focus on his relationship with you. Give your child the time he needs to adjust to separation.

Toddlers are beginning to develop a sense of independence. They are becoming aware of themselves and begin to speak and walk. They can use symbols to comfort themselves, such as a picture of Mom or a toy she gave them.

Because the successful attainment of these developmental tasks lays the foundation for secure and healthy children, parents should design a schedule that fits a child's needs at this stage. The best schedule, say the experts, is short but frequent time with the noncustodial parent: short because infants and toddlers can't maintain the image of their primary caretaker for long and frequent to enable them to bond with the noncustodial parent. Most psychologists agree there should be no overnight visitation for very young children.



In cases where both parents share physical custody, frequent daily time with each parent is the ideal. There are many innovative ways to share parenting responsibility at this stage. We know one couple who bought a second home in the wife's name following the divorce. Their child, a little girl, stayed on in the old house, now in the father's name. The parents shared custody by taking turns staying in the original family homestead. The “off-duty” parent lived in the new house. In short, the child had one stable home; instead, it was the parents who bore the brunt of constant change by moving back and forth. This model is known as “nesting” or “bird nesting” for the obvious reason that the young remain in the nest, as the parents come and go.

Two-and-a-Half to Five Years

This is a time of continued growth and individuality. These young children can now hold the absent parent in mind for longer periods of time. Their language is developed enough to enable these youngsters to express feelings and needs. They have more control over their feelings and bodily functions. This is also the age when children begin to identify more with the same-sex parent.



Although it ultimately depends on the temperament of the individual child, this is typically the age where time away from the primary caretaker can increase, and overnights can be introduced. If the child resists long periods away from her primary caretaker, short but frequent visits should continue until the child is better able to withstand longer separations, these young children often find it very difficult to sleep over and it is often better to wait until after five years to introduce sleep overs and long visits to other parent.

Those who share physical custody must continue to be sensitive to their child's reaction to continual change.

Six to Eight Years

The hallmark of this period is development of peer and community relationships, a moral sense, empathy, and better self-regulation of impulses. Children develop a concept of themselves as they gain competence and master skills.

For children to develop normally, it's important during this age for the noncustodial parent to participate in the activities within the community in which the children live. At this stage, children thrive on consistent contact with friends, school, and extra-curricular activities. Although the length of time away from home can be increased for those aged six to eight, if a child is homesick, most child development experts recommend that the time away should be decreased to a tolerable level.

Nine to Twelve Years

During these years, children develop their academic, athletic, and artistic skills. They become more involved in community activity. There is an increased desire to maintain friendships and seek approval of peers, as well as growing self-awareness as they begin to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses against the larger arena of the world.

As before, the noncustodial parent is advised to schedule visits, as much as possible, within the orbit of the child's home base. The closer children feel to the noncustodial parent, the more agreeable they will be to segments of time away from community activities and friends.

Thirteen to Eighteen Years

Teenagers often feel displaced in the wake of divorce, and the experts say that support groups of peers can often be particularly helpful. Do look to get your adolescent involved in a well-run support activity to help with the transition.

This period marks the beginning of psychological emancipation as children establish their personal identity more strongly than ever before. There is a mourning of the loss of childhood as children relinquish dependency and the protection of the family circle to venture out on their own. Kids at this age are dealing with their sexual feelings. They are also beginning to see how to work within the rules and regulations of society.

At this age, children have generally come to count on a fairly established visitation schedule and routine. Nonetheless, that may change as these teenage children seek to have input into the schedule so that it dovetails with their increasingly complex academic and social lives. It is difficult to force an adolescent into a schedule he or she did not help to create. In fact, if you are divorcing when your child is this age, don't be surprised if the judge meets with him or her to hear what he or she has to say. Many states allow a judge to consider (but not necessarily defer to) the preferences of any child over the age of 12, giving due weight to the child's individual maturity and development.



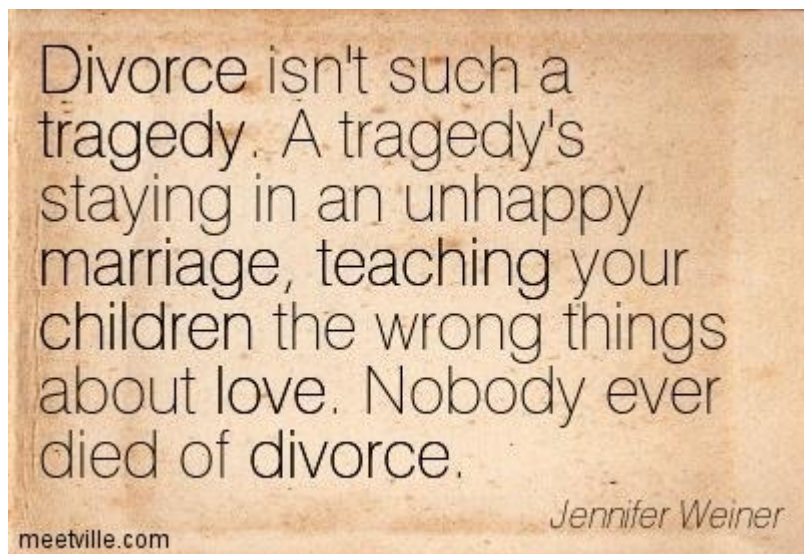
Adopt an attitude of sensitivity and flexibility when it comes to the visitation schedule you establish for your children. If your children are nearing adolescence, their social agenda will be paramount to them. Although spending time with their parents is very important (and sacred for the noncustodial parent), parents who respect their children's needs to develop a social life of their own will be helping them to grow normally.

In situations where physical custody is shared, parents should consider living within a few blocks of each other in the same town. Expecting teens with school, sports, and social lives to "commute" is unfair.

In the first couple of years a baby needs to attach to his/her primary caregiver (in this case you, the mom) in order to feel safe and secure. Separation anxiety can be a problem if the baby is separated from the mom so I would not recommend sleepovers for at least two years.

This does not mean the father cannot spend as much time as possible with the baby. You will both have to be creative and flexible in negotiating a plan that you both are happy with, remembering that good communication and an amicable relationship will benefit your child. Also bear in mind that as your child grows and his/her needs change you will need to review your plan together to meet your child's needs. For example if you have a son he may need to spend more time with his dad when he is older as his dad will be his role model.

As you suggested, if you can all be together with your respective partners as time goes on it will help your child not feel as if she/he has to choose between his parents. In ideal situations some separated parents have been able to even go on holiday with their respective partners so they can all be together for special occasions.



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