

Exchanges

It is important for your child to have frequent and predictable contact with both parents. Many custody orders require this contact. What this means is that there likely will be an interaction between you and the other parent when your child moves from one home to the other. This transition has the potential to be difficult for both parents and particularly for your child.

Why do children have difficulty making the transition from one parent to the other? Exchanges are unpleasant reminders of the failure of your partnership and a reenactment of the separation of the family for your child. Some parents view exchanges as opportunities for partner battles to continue or as a time for payback and revenge. When parents actively engage in conflict with each other, children are affected and may display emotional withdrawal, apprehension, physical complaints, aggression and age-regressive behaviors. Think about it for a moment: you and the other parent may interact with each other only during times of switching your child from one home to the other. As a result, the child sees the two of you together only at these times. If you spend this time fighting over partner business or parenting issues like visitation and money, your child comes to expect the exchanges to be loaded with conflict. As a consequence, it is not surprising that the child displays symptoms of distress. ...

Exchanges create a special problem for your child. One parent will arrive eager to see and start spending time with the child. The other parent will be feeling sad about the end of their time together. Your child can sense how you feel and does not know how to interact with an eager parent and sad parent at the same time. If you are also anxious about anticipating the next flare up with the other parent, the emotional tension increases. This causes your child to become anxious and stressed. Hence, the level of anxiety and stress increases with each exchange.

***You have a choice whether to be present during the exchange.
Your child does not have a choice.***

Exchanges require coordination, communication and consideration. When there is a breakdown in any of these areas, problems occur. This is a list of common ways that exchanges are frustrated:

- Parent is late for the exchange
- Parent not informed about changes to schedule
- Parent makes snide comments
- Parent attempts to discuss issues on the fly
- Parent is rude, belligerent or argumentative
- Parent cannot be respectful in presence of other parent
- Child's clothing or other supplies are not exchanged
- Information about the child's welfare (health, homework, medications, etc.) is not provided

Exchanges should be low-key and businesslike to decrease the anxiety and distress for your child. Some parents think about handling the exchange like a pizza delivery: show up, greet each other courteously, take care of the exchange, and leave. Ideally, the exchange should proceed the same way each time. The more you can keep the elements routine, the less chance there will be for guesswork, misunderstanding, conflict, or distrust.

Exchange sites should be determined primarily by the needs of your child rather than parental preferences. The “pizza delivery” is an example of a very child-friendly exchange. For some families, the home drop-off exchange may be appropriate when a child is mature enough to go from the car to the door alone.

Exchanging your child on “neutral territory” has the advantage of getting your child out of the house and into the car ready for an exchange. It also preserves your privacy. If you and the other parent frequently engage in open, hostile conflict, an exchange in a public setting encourages everyone to be on his or her best behavior. If you find it almost impossible to interact without engaging in conflict, then you should consider having the switchover occur where there is no contact between the two of you: at daycare, school, homes of other family members, or a monitored exchange program. Exchanges at a police station are often suggested for families in conflict but have some significant drawbacks for children. People with all kinds of problems move in and out of police stations, exposing your child to risk. Police stations are not designed as child-friendly places and are often intimidating to children.

Recommendations for Good Exchanges

- ❑ Keep it simple. Exchanges are not the time to do business.
- ❑ Each parent should have a copy of a detailed month-by-month visitation schedule to reduce misunderstanding over when exchanges will occur.
- ❑ Confirm the time and location of the next exchange with the other parent.
- ❑ Have your child ready in advance with all clothes and other items he is taking with him packed and ready to go. If your child is going to need to bring anything special with him for the visit, let the other parent know in advance.
- ❑ Allow extra time for travel in the event of traffic delays, etc. Do not be late or fail to show up for an exchange. If this happens frequently, your child will think you have other priorities more important than him.
- ❑ Making, canceling or changing visitation plans is the responsibility of the parents. Do not ask your child to handle this. Do not use your child to convey messages to the other parent during exchanges.
- ❑ Speak to the other parent in advance about any changes in the visitation schedule. Use dispute resolution services to work this out instead of trying to work this out during an exchange in front of the child.

CHILD VISITATION HOTLINE 816-736-8402

Resources:

The Co-Parenting Survival Guide, Elizabeth S. Thayer & Jeffrey Zimmerman, New Harbinger Publications, Inc. (2001)

Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust, Nicholas Long & Rex Forehand, McGraw Hill (2002)

Mom’s House, Dad’s House: Making Two Homes for Your Child, Isolina Ricci, Simon & Schuster (1997)