

LONG DISTANCE PARENTING

CHILDREN FEEL LOVED IF THEY HAVE REGULAR CONTACT WITH PARENTS.

Children might feel they are not loved by a parent who doesn't see them regularly. Children often interpret lack of contact as lack of love. So that children feel loved, it is very important for parents to work together to encourage a healthy relationship between children and their far away parent.

Regular contact by telephone and by video chat can help to reassure children who live far away. It lets them know parents think about them often and still love them. The key is SHOW and TELL.

When talking with your children, don't ask them to give a message to their other parent, don't ask them about the personal life of their other parent, and don't talk negatively about their other parent. Children who become messengers or spies or who hear bad things about their parents suffer damage.

PARENTS MAY FEAR LOSING THEIR CHILDREN WHEN THEY MOVE FAR AWAY.

Often at the time of divorce, parents have extreme fears of losing or being denied their relationship with their children. A major move often brings a flashback of these fears and fills parents with desperation as they imagine the difficulty of maintaining a long distance relationship with their children.

When one parent is planning to move, the best way to deal with the other parent is by telling them as soon as possible. Secretiveness will intensify fears and distrust. It is very helpful to reassure the other parent that you will continue to encourage a strong relationship between them and the children. It is also very helpful to reassure children they will continue to have regular contact with their other parent.

DISTANCE HURTS.

“. . . the physical separation hurts. Many miles means no way to hug, to brush back a forelock of hair, to drop in on football practice, or to watch a first book report being written. The parent separated from the child feels the pain and so does the child” says Dr. Isolina Ricci in Mom's House Dad's House.

DISTANCE FEELS FINAL.

Families separated by distance know “. . . distance feels final, and gives tangible proof that the parents are separated. A common reaction of children is to fantasize about Mom and Dad getting back together. If a parent or a child has been hoping, however unconsciously, that the old family feeling or the old marriage was not finished, long distance will bring that hope painfully to the surface” (Ricci, p. 206).

Don't be surprised if feelings (believed to be long since resolved) come back. This gives another chance for closure of the old relationship and another chance for parents to help children gain more closure around the old family structure. Steps in closure include: 1) notice feelings, 2) experience feelings and emotions, 3) let feelings go. Some people worry if they open the door to feelings and experience their emotions, these feelings will take over, keeping people stuck in the feelings forever. It is such a relief to discover feelings do not come and stay – feelings come and go. Parents need to help children understand that feelings come and go – so children are not afraid of their feelings.

PREDICTABILITY HELPS CHILDREN DEAL WITH DISTANCE.

Children of all ages need to have clear and exact understanding of how and when they will have that all-important contact with Mom or Dad. Separation hurts and when children don't know when they will see or hear from a parent it unnecessarily adds to their pain.

Children who have no idea about the next contact with a parent can feel tremendous loss and grieving at the end of each contact with that parent. They may truly worry they will never see that parent again. Parents can reduce stress for children by telling them exactly what the schedule is for contacts with their far away parent.

REFUSING TO LET CHILDREN BE WITH THEIR OTHER PARENT BACKFIRES.

When a parent interferes with the relationship between children and their other parent, it always backfires in time. This can be as simple as showing displeasure when the other parent calls or sends something in the mail or belittling or bad mouthing the other parent or refusing to allow children contact with their other parent. Children who are cut off from a parent often imagine that parent is perfect and ideal. Children may fantasize about how wonderful their lives would be if they were with their far away parent. It is usually better for children to have a realistic experience of their parents instead of a relationship they create entirely in their fantasies.

Regardless of the reason for encouraging children not to love or be with their other parent, when children grow up they usually blame the home-base parent for the relationship they didn't have with their other parent.

ENCOURAGE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR OTHER PARENT.

Parents can use the same ways they use to encourage a positive healthy relationship between children and their far away grandparents. For instance: speak positively about the other parent, tell children it's OK to love their other parent, help children look forward to being with their other parent, talk about their being with the other parent as safe and enjoyable, let children have photos of their far away parent, help them keep a scrapbook of the time with their far away parent, be happy and excited when children receive mail or photos from their other parent, and make it possible for children to be available during the time their other parent has arranged to telephone or videochat.

Children are sensitive to how parents feel and often worry they will hurt one parent if they enjoy being with their other parent. Parents help children by assuring them they deserve to feel good about their relationships with both parents! Reassure children that enjoying a good relationship with one parent doesn't take away from their relationship with the other parent.

SPEND TIME WITH CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE WITH YOU.

A common complaint from children who see a far away parent is that they spend more time with the stepparent and stepfamily than they do with their Mom or Dad. Often children have been looking forward to this time and have all kinds of expectations about how they will spend the time with their Mom or Dad. Discuss ahead of time what will be happening and what children can expect when they will be with their far away parent. Children always cope better when they have predictability.

Children treasure time alone with a parent they haven't seen for awhile. Parents should include work, play, and time alone with children when they are together. Plan one-on-one time with each child!

I WORRY THE STEPPARENT IS TRYING TO TAKE MY PLACE.

This is a common concern among parents whether or not they live far away. Children need to be able to manage their own relationship with a stepparent. Sometimes a parent gives the impression their feelings are hurt or children are disloyal if children like a stepparent. This unfairly puts children in the middle of parents' insecurities and creates unnecessary stress for children. Children do best when they are free to choose whether or not they like their stepparents. Children can thrive when they have several grownups that care about them.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILDREN WHO HAVEN'T SEEN MOM OR DAD IN A LONG TIME?

Children who haven't seen a parent in a long time often believe they are unlovable. Children benefit when reassured they are LOVABLE and that you will always love them (even though parents don't always like everything children say or do). Children under age seven need to be told they are lovable over and over because their brains don't understand "always" yet.

Parents cannot make up for disappointments and hurt feelings of children caused by others. It is common for parents to disappoint children – by telling children they can't do something or have something they want, by breaking promises, or by irregular contact. When children are disappointed about the other parent, LISTEN and offer comfort without cutting down the other parent. Parents do not have to agree with, or fix children's feelings. Help children by reflecting back what children say and feel. For instance, "I can tell you are disappointed about . . ." "I wish I knew what to say to help." "This is very disappointing." Reflecting back (like a mirror) lets children know parents hear them, understand how they feel, and care about them. Many times this is all parents can do, and exactly what children need.

Because parents can't "fix" what happens between children and their other parent, parents' greatest gift is to listen to children and offer them comfort. If parents talk down about the other parent, children are forced to take sides and are caught in the middle. Children feel guilty and disloyal when they take sides by DEFENDING a parent or by NOT DEFENDING a parent being cut down. This is not fair to children and is harmful. Children need room to learn about both parents on their own.

WHAT ABOUT WHEN A PARENT SHOWS UP AGAIN AFTER HAVING NO CONTACT?

Children benefit greatly when a parent they haven't seen or heard from in months or years reestablishes REGULAR AND PREDICTABLE contact. The home-base parent may mistrust the motives of the reappearing parent or want to punish that parent for not being around. The home-base parent may feel the other parent gave up all rights to a relationship with the children by disappearing. Maybe the home-base parent wants to protect the children from hope in case the other parent leaves again.

Children benefit when they have a chance to build or rebuild a HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP with their other parent. It is also important that this relationship is (re)built gradually to allow trust to develop. Obviously, parents must take care to keep the relationship from being interrupted again so children don't have to go through additional unnecessary pain.

TRANSPORTATION COSTS MORE WHEN THERE IS A LONG DISTANCE PARENT.

There are additional financial burdens when parenting long-distance. Vicki Lansky in her Divorce Book for Parents (p. 163) suggests, "Try to accept that all these costs are simply extra and think of them as you would any other investment with long-term benefits." Consider how travel costs will be paid, what priority will travel money have in family budgets, and what happens if somebody fails to come through.

TIPS FOR THE FAR AWAY PARENT (compiled from Dr. Isolina Ricci and Vicki Lansky):

1. Reassure your children you will still be connected with them when they are living with their other parent.
2. Give your child immediate proof of your connection with him or her – a phone call on arrival at the new place, perhaps the child is old enough to have his or her own phone.
3. Contact your child's school so you know a little about his or her world.
4. Call your children (who are old enough) at least weekly.
5. Consider setting up an email address for your children to allow communication.
6. Send audio or video of yourself reading bedtime stories, showing parts of your day, etc.
7. Send pictures of you, your life and environment.
8. Collect things that remind you of your children and put them in a "Thinking of you" box. Date the items, and look at them together next time they are with you.
9. When calling on special occasions, predetermined times for phone calls are usually helpful.
10. If your budget allows, watch a TV show or TV sports event "together" by phone or skype.
11. Keep a running list (like a grocery list) of things you'd like to share with your children during the week. Encourage your children to do the same.
12. Children love to receive email, so write as often as you can. This is not the time to preach and teach. Parents mistakenly believe preaching and teaching proves they are good parents.
13. Each time your children are with you be prepared for changes – new habits, likes and dislikes.
14. Let your children know you miss them, but that you have an interesting life that continues when they are not with you, so that they don't feel guilty about your loneliness.
15. Utilize children's activities in your community: library story hours, park programs, day camps.
16. Videotape your activities with your children so they can watch themselves with you between times they see you.

MORE TIPS FOR THE FAR AWAY PARENT (From Children of Divorce by M. Baris and C. Garrity and V. Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents):

Suggestions for CHILDREN FROM 0 TO 2 ½ YEARS OLD:

Telephone calling doesn't work well at this age because children are unable to speak well. Frequent reminders that their far away parent exists and cares about the child are important to help the child hold a memory of the parent in mind. Phone calls are more possible at the later end of this stage even though children this age won't do much talking. Hearing a parent's voice is the main goal of the call.

1. Send many pictures.
2. Send audio or videotapes of yourself.
 - a. use the child's name frequently
 - b. sing children's songs
 - c. tell favorite stories
3. Send little colorful, fun amusements:
 - a. paper cutouts
 - b. stickers
 - c. autumn leaves, sea shells, whatever is found in your locale
 - d. paper hats
 - e. homemade items
4. Send cards at holidays and special occasions.

Suggestions for CHILDREN FROM 2 ½ TO 5 YEARS OLD:

Preschool aged children have very different abilities to talk on the phone. Yet all of them love to listen. Keep in mind parents will carry on a one-way conversation at this age. Avoid "why" questions. Children almost always respond, "I don't know." Young children have a hard time answering open-ended questions, such as "What did you do this week?" or "How are you?" Specific questions about details in their lives are the best way to get information, such as "Did you go to the playground this week?"

1. Frequent phone or video calls with planned topics.
2. Send audios, videos or letters as often as possible:
 - a. Tell about yourself and use your children's names often.
 - b. Talk about shared experiences, such as "Remember the day we went to the zoo? You dropped your snow cone and we had to buy a new one and the monkeys were so silly."
 - c. Read stories onto audio or video tapes.
 - d. Send pictures cut from magazines and photos. Most children also love riddles.
3. Send a drawing you have started to your child to finish. Enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope so it can be returned to you. Talk about the drawing on the phone or on a taped message.
4. Children love to receive little treats in the mail:
 - a. stickers
 - b. baseball cards
 - c. balloons
 - d. small pieces of candy
 - e. homemade items
 - f. photographs
5. Send a magazine subscription and get one for yourself, too. Read and share the stories over the phone videochat.

Suggestions for CHILDREN FROM 6 TO 12 YEARS OLD:

Many of the suggestions for preschool-aged children work for school age children if adapted to older ages. Children always love to receive mail. Phone calls may be more conversational since children this age are more able to carry on a two-way conversation. Audios and videos can be uploaded and downloaded both directions with children making them also. Because children are now older, parents can share more interest, hobbies, and remembering experiences.

1. Plan to watch the same TV program and then call to discuss it.
2. Practice reading over the phone by sending your child a reading book at his/her level and listening with your own copy in front of you.
3. Send local objects or links to news stories of interest. Pick favorite topics - computers, new fashion trends, whatever your child is interested in. Preaching is usually not well received.
4. Send magic tricks - children adore these.
5. Purchase some equipment for your children's special hobbies or interests such as dance shoes, a football, the next karate belt, a backpack, or a lunch box with a special character. The idea is that something that is a part of your child's life was sent specifically by you.
6. Send a cute card when you don't have much to say.

Suggestions for CHILDREN FROM 12 TO 17 YEARS OLD:

Teenagers can assume some responsibility for traveling to be with their far away parent. However, whether parents live together or separately, teenage years are when individual interests, school, sports and friends can seem more important than being with a parent. Also, part time jobs can be important to teenagers during breaks from school.

Parents shouldn't be surprised if teenagers choose to spend school breaks working or involved in sports. A helpful hint is for parents not to take this personally. This is a normal part of teenager's healthy growth away from family and towards independence and is not a sign that parents are not important. Continue to let teens know parents are interested and love them even if teenagers are unresponsive to efforts to have a relationship across a distance. Let teens know parents are happy to hear from them anytime and see them when they are ready. Many young adults reestablish relationships with parents once they are out of high school.

1. Frequent calling sometimes feels like prying to teens. Call from time to time and give permission for them to call you whenever they like. When they call, try to not to criticize or question excessively.
2. Send food. Teenagers love to eat. Send gift certificates for restaurants.
3. Be aware of their interests and send related objects or links to news stories. Pick favorite topics - computers, new fashion trends, whatever your child is interested in. Preaching is usually not well received.
4. Most teens have some interest in knowing more about their heritage or roots. Send items or audio or video messages of interest about family background.
5. Share a magazine subscription in a subject of interest; skiing, racquetball, dancing, skating.
6. Arrange to purchase tickets to a local athletic event or concert and send them.