

Ask the Experts

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Divorce Win

Q I am in the process of divorcing my husband and we've mediated to avoid too much upheaval for our kids. But our family is really struggling with the classic weekend-dad thing — every meal out, movies and outings galore, all new things for their rooms at his new home... I understand his wanting to make the most of his limited time with them and that the new things were a necessity, but I sense they come home and resent our comparatively “boring” life. I know it's not a competition...but how do I compete?

Family

A Separation and divorce typically results in children having reduced time with each parent. This can create a dynamic where each parent may worry how their child perceives their time with them, igniting a sense of competition. What appears to be major differences in “exciting” weekend activities with one parent compared to the “boring” everyday responsibilities experienced with the other parent can place added stress on families already struggling to navigate through the fall-out from divorce.

You've probably heard the cliché about “Disneyland dads” who have the tendency to try to make every second with their children extraordinary. Depending on the custody arrangements, moms can also show this same tendency. Children may spend more time and feel more attached to one parent versus the other. Research shows that children respond with attachment behavior to the adults that are most available for caregiving, regardless of the gender of the parent. Emphasis should be placed more on the nature of the attachment relationship and on the traumatic effects of disruptions to that relationship than on the gender of the parent. Therefore, the quality of the time spent with each parent deserves careful attention so as to reduce some of the trauma from having to alternate.

A parent may knowingly (or unknowingly) focus on showering the child with excessive toys and activities to reduce their own guilt

or to win the child over from the other parent. However, interest in new toys, frequent trips to amusement parks, or new furniture will usually fade quickly when what that child is really seeking is reattachment with a parent. When closeness with a parent isn't regularly provided, a child can become aloof to that parent and also become emotionally disconnected in future adult relationships. Occasional exciting new toys or trips are fine, but your children will appreciate quality “hanging out” time much more.

Make it clear to your children that you plan to spend as much quality time as possible and start right away in setting up special activities with them. This can be reassuring for your children at a time when they need attention the most. It is important to remember that activities don't have to be expensive. It is about the quality of the time spent together that will serve to sustain their greatest sense of emotional security.

Mature parenting involves a hundred small tasks. Many of them can be boring or routine, yet routine is what makes children feel cared for and secure. Another aspect of mature parenting after divorce is being positive about your child's relationship with the other parent and encouraging them to talk about the good times they had during their time together. This can include you, as a parent, saying positive things about what the other parent did with them. Unresolved hostility toward an ex-spouse can be addressed in therapy with a professional to reduce the exposure of conflict around the children.

Remember that when your children are grown, they will not remember most of the toys they had, but instead will remember the happy and close times they spent with each parent.



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