

## Parenting When Apart: Tips for Non-Resident Fathers<sup>1</sup>

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### Overview

When couples divorce and a single-parent family is formed, children face many changes in their family life. One of the biggest changes, and one that can often be difficult, happens when a child stops living with both parents, which can mean the child loses daily contact with his or her father. Fathers who don't live with their children – also called non-resident fathers – tend to lose contact with their children over time.

Fathers who value their roles tend to be involved with their children after divorce or separation. In general, maintaining contact is good for fathers and children. However, it is very important that the relationship is positive.

If you are a father who has recently separated or divorced, you may worry about the time you have with your children. After separation, it is not the amount of time you spend with your child that matters, but the quality of the relationship (Lamb, 2002; Leite & McKenry, 2002; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000).

### Ten Tips on Fathering When Apart

Here are some tips for making sure that your involvement in your child's life is all it can be, even when you don't live in the same home.

1. **Make a schedule to visit with your child.**  
Be sure you have regular contact. If possible, try to make a custody arrangement that involves frequent overnight visits with your child. Plan phone calls and visits at regular times so that your child knows what to expect and can look forward to seeing you. Make your schedule one you can live up to. It's great to visit with your child at other times too, but keep this basic schedule as the bare minimum. Remember that what adults call a schedule children call a

promise, especially when they expect to get to visit their father after not seeing him for some time.

2. **Learn your child's day-to-day routine.**  
Knowing your child's schedule, such as the timing of sports or lessons, will make it easier to arrange visits, help you understand your child's daily life, and bring a helpful routine to your time with your child. Learn your child's bedtime, activities, and mealtimes. Learn what he or she likes to eat and when he or she likes to eat it. Know what time your child typically does homework and when he or she likes to go out and play.

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3. **Show interest in your child's school and other activities.** Let your child know that the things he or she does when not with you are important to you. Keep up with your child's progress in school, homework assignments, and other school related activities. Speak to your child often about his or her extracurricular activities, fun trips with friends, and feelings about school. These conversations show your child that you care about his or her education and want to be a part of all aspects of his or her life.
4. **Pay child support.** Making these payments is one of the most important things you can do to show your commitment to your child. Few women make enough to house, clothe, feed, and educate themselves and their children. You may have a judge tell you to pay child support. It's the law in most places, even if the parents were never married, never lived together, and had no prolonged relationship. While making your child support payments, you are showing your child that you care by providing for her or his needs. Also, making these payments will eliminate the most common source of conflict between a mother and father who have separated.
5. **Minimize conflict between you and your child's mother.** Often there are hard feelings between a mother and a father after separation or divorce. It's important to stop these feelings from spilling over to your relationship with your child. The more you work to reduce conflict with your child's mother, the easier it will be to play an important, healthy role in your child's life. You will find it's easier to do this if you keep your focus on the well-being of your child.
6. **Coordinate parenting strategies with your child's mother.** When a child spends time in two separate homes, differences in parenting styles can be highlighted. In these situations, mothers and fathers may take vastly different approaches to discipline, rewards for the child, and expectations for chores and other responsibilities. Such inconsistencies often leave a child confused and vulnerable to developing a behavioral or emotional problem. It is important to keep a healthy line of communication open with your child's mother regarding parenting practices, expectations for behavior, and other issues related to your child. Try to coordinate these efforts as best you can so that there is true consistency in the homes where your child is raised.
7. **Help your child adjust to other adults who may come into his or her home life.** As time goes by, you and your former spouse will probably become involved in new relationships. This means that your child will probably have other adults come into his or her life. In families who adjust well to life after parental separation, parents recognize the importance of these new adults in their child's life and work to reduce family conflict. At the same time, it is best not to place this other person in a parental or authority role over your child right away. Rather, provide opportunities for new adults to get to know and be a friend to your child. These transitions may be difficult for you and your child's mother. Feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and outright disapproval are common. Try to limit any conflict these feelings may cause between you and your child's mother.
8. **Read to your young child.** Reading to your young child allows you to spend quiet time together one-on-one. It helps to enhance your bond and communication. Also, it demonstrates the high value you place on the role of learning and education in your child's life. It seems so simple, but it's one of the most important activities that you can do with your child.
9. **Don't be a "vacation" for your child.** Non-resident fathers can sometimes get caught in the trap of always entertaining their child during the brief periods they spend with them. Weekend visits can be filled with trips to amusement parks, the zoo, movies, sporting events, and the like. This can cause several major problems. First, it sets the expectation that something terrific will happen every time the child goes

to "daddy's house." These expectations can be both expensive and exhausting. Another problem is that it can make life difficult for the child's mother. If your child spends time with you doing wonderful, exciting things, only to go home to face doing homework, cleaning up their room, or just hanging around the house, the transition back to the mother's home can be difficult. Finally, hectic vacation-like weekends don't allow you to participate in simple, everyday activities with your child like eating meals together, watching a favorite TV show, and taking a bike ride to the park.

- 10. Tell your child how much you love her or him.** Tell your child sincerely and often that

you love her or him. Children of parents who have separated often need extra reassurance that their parents care for them and love them. Sometimes children feel that they are to blame for the breakup and that their parents didn't love them enough to stay together. When you show your love, you reassure your child that she or he is not at fault. Also, by communicating your affection you help your child build a sense of security about her or his life. Non-resident fathers are important sources of advice and emotional support. Children need to know that you will be there to help them with their struggles.

## A Final Thought

These suggestions are intended to show you how to make the most positive impact on your child, even when you are apart. The key ingredients for being a successful non-resident father are patience, understanding, and involvement in your child's daily life. The best rule of thumb for helping your child develop in a healthy way is to focus your energy on your child's well-being above anything else.

## References

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