

Visitation: Two Really Tough Situations

BY PETER FAVARO AND CHARLES FERZOLA

1 What happens when a child returns from visitation and is out of control?

When there is tension between the parents, the custodial parent will likely blame the other parent for a child who is out-of-control or "wired" after visitation. The custodial parent will allege that the child ate the wrong things, was allowed to stay up too late, or was ill-behaved and undisciplined. In some cases, these explanations may be accurate.

However, it is equally possible that the child is having difficulty making the transition from one parent's home to the other's. Each visit can be traumatic in and of itself. In the child's mind, moving between the two homes may reaffirm the divorce and the upset that went with it. In addition, the child may fear the tension inherent in the transitions, in particular, if parents yell or fight. Upon returning home, the child may feel conflicted loyalties, especially if one parent bad-mouths the other.

A parent's positive attitude can reduce or prevent the child's tension. Even if it kills you, learn to say, "Tomorrow you are going to have a nice day with Mommy (or Daddy)." If you know that the child has difficulty readjusting after visitation, talk with the child beforehand and encourage self-control. Never yell or scream at the other parent in front of the child.

2 What happens when a child refuses to visit the other parent?

The worst thing a parent can say to a reluctant child is, "If you don't want to spend time with Mommy (or Daddy), you don't have to." This is a transparent way of showing your lack of interest in the child's relationship with the other parent. If the child seems to be avoiding visitation, encourage the child to go. Then carefully plan a conversation about it with your ex-spouse.

If necessary, write your ex a letter so that you can edit it before you send it. Communicate how important it is for the child to see that parent and for visitation to continue. Ask what you can do to help, and agree to discuss the problem with a counselor. Never make a unilateral decision to suspend visitation.

This can result in legal as well as psychological problems.



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