

# **LONG DISTANCE PARENTING**

## **CHILDREN FEEL LOVED IF THEY HAVE REGULAR CONTACT WITH PARENTS.**

Children feel they are not loved by a parent who doesn't see them regularly. Children 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 mail can go a long way to show love to 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 writing or telephoning, don't ask children 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. It is better for children when parents communicate directly with each other.

## **PARENTS 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 to 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 falling 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 this pain and so does the child" reports Dr. Isolina Ricci in her bestseller, Mom's House Dad's House (206).

## **DISTANCE FEELS FINAL.**

Families separated by distances 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 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 fade 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 2 parent feel tremendous loss and grieving at the end of each contact with that parent. They 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 BACK-FIRES.**

When a parent interferes with the relationship between children and their other parent, it always backfires in time. This can be 23 Simple 29 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 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 get to have with their other parent.

### **HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR OUR CHILDREN & 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 photo's from their other parent, and make it possible for children to be at home during the time their other parent has arranged to telephone.

Children are sensitive to how parents feel and believe 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 Dad or Mom. 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 a while. Parents should include work, play and time alone with children when they are together. Plan some one-on-one time with each child!

## **I WORRY THE STEP-PARENT 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.

The home-base parent can help by supporting the relationship between children and their far away parent. Parents need to show by their words and actions, that the stepparent will never take the place of Dad or Mom. Although it may be difficult, it helps when parents encourage children's relationships with stepparents - they are additions to children's lives, not replacements of parents.

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

Children who haven't seen a parent in a long time often believe they are unlovable. Parents need to reassure children they are LOVABLE and that parents 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 or 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 ...", "You must be wondering why you haven't heard from your mother/father." "Maybe you don't feel lovable because it has been so long since you have seen him/her.", "I can tell you are angry or frustrated or sad or lonely or...", "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. Often the home-base parent mistrusts the motives of the reappearing parent or wants 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 out of the children's lives. Maybe the home-base parent wants to protect the children from building hope only to have the other parent leave again.

It is important to understand children benefit when they have a chance to rebuild a HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP with their other parent, It is also important that this relationship is rebuilt 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, (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." Dr. Ricci (205) suggests parents consider these questions: Who will pay for travel: Both parents? In what proportions? What about rising costs? What priority will travel money have in family budgets? What happens if somebody fails to come through? Will older children contribute? Will certain money-saving measures be written into the agreement to ensure the lowest fares?