

Summer Tips for Divorced or Separated Parents

By Don Gordon, PhD

With school ending soon, summer brings opportunities and challenges for co-parents. Children are happy to be out of school and look forward to a lot of play and activities with friends and family. It is important for you to recognize and validate their excitement. When children get ideas about doing fun things, it is the idea and anticipation that is most satisfying. When life gets in the way and they cannot do what they hoped for, you can still validate their wish and excitement, and teach them to hold on to that feeling.

Let's discuss some of these challenges and opportunities:

1. Meet with your co-parent well in advance of the summer to plan schedule changes. Use a mediator if necessary. Plan vacations in advance (end of winter). Involve your kids. Depending on your children's ages, ask their opinions about day camp, childcare while at home, and activities. Avoid surprising your co-parent with last minute requests for a parenting time schedule change. Although that will be necessary from time to time, it carries the risk that your co-parent will feel disrespected as if their plans and schedule don't matter to you. Be prepared to offer similar flexibility when they want a last-minute schedule change.

2. Plan ahead for which parent will handle transportation to birthday parties, who pays for the gifts, splitting costs for summer activities (camps, daycare, sports, new clothes, etc). Discussions ahead of time will help keep stress and frustration out of the conversation. If you or your ex have a tendency to assume the worst about the other's motives, dealing with all the changes and communication necessary for planning summers will be far more difficult. With practice, you can change this negative attitude.

Create a list of expenses that may arise during summer and share this list with your co-parent and have them (or you) put down one of your names next to the expenses each of you plan to pay for. This will give you each the understanding and expectations upfront of costs and transportation before it becomes an overwhelming issue.

3. Use the extended time with your children to the fullest and focus on being fully present with them. Avoid thinking of other things while with them and keep this time away from your smart phone. Nothing sends a clearer message to a child that they are not important as a parent spending lots of time looking at their phone (or talking or texting). For most of us, these phones have become addictive and it takes a concentrated effort to put them away.

Consider putting the phone in airplane mode when with your children. Remember, you are setting an example for them, and when they are older you will have a hard time getting their attention. If you have decided to take your children to the lake or beach, try leaving your phone either on silent or in your car while spending this time with them.

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4. Summer often means your children will be spending extended time with their other parent, especially if you live far from the other parent or you do not have shared parenting time. If your children are young, they may have more difficulty with time away from you. Practice good self-care so you can enjoy your time away from your kids. This includes contact with family and good friends, relaxing via exercise and meditation, eating healthy, sleeping well. Plan with your ex to have regular contact with your children, such as phone calls, Face Time, texting, and some in-person visits.

Expect that when your child spends extended time with the other parent, they will really miss you. Reach an agreement about how to have supportive contact with your child during that time. It is important for the parent with extended time to allow that child to express feelings of missing their other parent. Children need your explicit permission to love their other parent. Otherwise they are in a loyalty conflict that is very stressful and damaging to them. The *Children in Between Online* program focuses on reducing these loyalty conflicts and reducing the stress on children.

5. Avoid competing with your co-parent by planning a more expensive vacation or buying expensive toys for your children. You have the opportunity in the summer to create great memories for you and your kids, and those are more determined by the quality of your attention and relationship to your children rather than what money can buy. Avoid thinking of time with your child as your time. It is the child's time. Make decisions so that their happiness during the summer is your priority.

Show support and excitement for plans your co-parent made with the kids that they will enjoy. If you continue to let your negative or competitive feeling show to your child(ren), it will taint their summer and spoil their memories. Allow the children to be excited about both time with you, and your co-parent.

We wish you and yours the very best,



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