

Tips for Summer Transitions

Here are some suggestions on how to help summer contacts between parents and children go easier on the family.

Prepare Your Child

If you are the parent sending your children on the trip, don't burden them with your own anxiety. Help your children anticipate the trip with enthusiasm and the expectation of a pleasurable time with your ex.

Be Ready for Your Child

If you are the receiving parent, make sure that your home is child-friendly. This means baby-proofing the home for infants and toddlers, close supervision around the pool, and toys and games that can maintain children's interests. Arrange play dates with other children. Some parents want to occupy the child's time exclusively in order to make up for absence during the school year. This is short-sighted. You want your child to be comfortable in your home. This means spending some time playing with other children.

Be Sensitive to Your Child's Feelings

If the child objects to the trip, try to figure out why. Is it normal pre-trip jitters, is the time period too long, or had the child has prior bad experiences with the summer contact? Both parents should facilitate phone contact; sometimes it helps to prearrange times for these to take place.

Allow Children to Take Possessions that Comfort Them

Young children will want to take their security blanket, older children will want to take a favorite toy. Some parents do not want objects from their home to go to the ex's home; if they keep their focus on their child's needs, they will be less rigid about this.

Be Flexible

If both parents can agree on a different schedule, it isn't necessary to follow the same schedule every summer. What works for children when they are five is not necessarily the best plan when they are fifteen. Sometimes it can help to restructure the contact into smaller blocks of time so that a young child is not away from her familiar environment for too long a period of time. Keep your focus on your child's needs, not your "rights."

Avoid the Term "Visit"

Visit means that a person is set apart, in some fundamental way, from others at the same location. A visitor is a guest in the home. Without thinking about it, every time we use this term to designate the time children spend with their father we are endorsing a destructive idea. We are telling children that after divorce their relationship with their father must be transformed into something less than a normal parent-child relationship. Rather than reassure children that they have not lost a parent as a result of the divorce, we give them the message that their father is no longer central in their lives. He is no longer a parent in the same sense as he was before the divorce.