

## Keep Your Cool Co-Parenting This Summer

School will be out soon and the children couldn't be happier. Summer schedules, however, present many challenges for divorced or separated parents who now have children home 24/7 and need to rearrange custodial access schedules. With fewer stay-at-home parents these days, the free time summer break provides to children presents parenting challenges that require good co-parenting skills.

Many separated or divorced parents have separation or custodial agreements that address custodial access during the school year and holidays. However, they often fail to address how time with the children will be shared during the 8-10 weeks schools are out of session. With most parents in the work force, this often means that neither is available for the children despite the strong desire to spend time with them. The answer to this problem sounds easy, but can be difficult for couples that have been estranged or dragged through a legal system that often causes further distance between them. The answer is communication.

Communication and co-parenting have to be a constant and growing effort between mothers and fathers. As long as there is a child in common for whom decisions need to be made, parents must put aside their differences and focus on what the courts want them to focus on – what is best for the children.

For summer breaks this includes whether the parents can free up any of their work schedule to be more available for the children. If not, then what kind of child care, summer camps or programs will the children be enrolled in? Where will these be held and how does that affect each parent's access? What about cost? All valid questions and ones that, in most custodial cases, must be made jointly; meaning one parent does not have sole decision making over the other.

It is not unusual for parents to save most of their vacation time for the summer and to actually split the summer schedule with each parent taking a block of four to five weeks at a time or in various combinations, so as to have uninterrupted quality time with the children. There are many positives to this, including the ability to travel and make long-term plans without having to have the children back for a weekend visit.

On the other hand, depending on the age of the children as well as the maturity of the children (and the parents), these long periods of separation from one party while the other enjoys vacation, can be difficult. In the end, most children will adjust if each parent puts forth a positive attitude and sense of cooperation. The parent's adjustment may be a whole other issue, but again, that is what parenting is about.

There are many resources available for parents who need help communicating. Co-parenting counselors are growing in number. These are trained counselors who will work with parents, separately and together, and often with the children and parents in various combinations. Their role is to help couples work through differences and find not just solutions, but problem solving techniques that the parties can use in the future.

Many counties also have court-approved parenting seminars which are increasingly becoming mandatory for parents going through custodial issues. These are often just two- to three-hour

programs that the parties attend individually. They are very good at sensitizing parents to what their children go through when the parties can't get along and resort to the legal system for help.

Sometimes the issue is not so much a schedule of custodial access, but how to pay for the needed summer care programs. Yes, the courts are there to help parents when "all else fails." But with regard to arranging a custodial schedule, except in very rare cases, "all else" should not fail. There is too much at stake. Anticipating issues that will arise and working through strategies to address them are essential. Legal counsel is always a good place to start. The experienced lawyers who practice custody law, will, except in extreme cases where a child is in danger, advise most parents to pursue therapeutic or co-parenting options before putting their issues before the legal system.

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