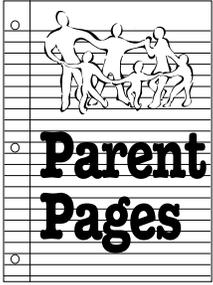


Prepare Preschooler to Visit the Non-residential Parent



When parents decide to live apart, their young children often feel angry, sad, confused or worried that their behavior somehow caused the problem. If violence, quarreling or tension has pervaded the family atmosphere, children may even feel a sense of guilty relief that an unhappy state of affairs has ended.

In situations like this, children need the support of sensitive adults willing to accept their feelings and able to offer brief, reassuring explanations. Ideally, parents will speak with the child together in as supportive and loving a manner as possible. Such an explanation for a preschooler might be, "Mommy and Daddy were finding it too hard to live in the same house. We both love you very much and understand you feel sad (or angry or confused, etc.). We're going to work out a plan for you to live with Mommy and visit Daddy every week (or whatever arrangement has been made)."



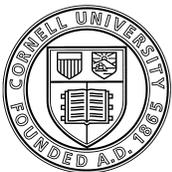
While parents can be honest about expressing their own pain and disappointment that the relationship between them did not work out, they should try not to blame or disparage their ex-partner in their conversations with young children. It is overwhelming for children to be asked to side with one parent against the other or even to hear harsh criticism of their beloved mother or father.

Once parents have separated, a preschool child is more likely to live with one parent and visit the other regularly, often over weekends. Careful planning will be necessary to ensure that consistency and predictability are maintained as the child moves between homes. Whenever possible, parents should agree on rules for behavior, gift giving, holiday celebrations and daily routines such as bedtime.

A third adult who is trusted by both parents may be helpful as an intermediary if direct communication between them is too difficult. Children should not be used to carry messages between parents. "Mommy says to tell you that I don't have to go to bed until 9 o'clock," or "Daddy says you should buy me new sneakers," and similar statements will almost always elicit a negative reaction from the parent who hears them and may even lead to unpleasant consequences for the child.

Some children spend most of the year with one parent and visit the other for several weeks or even months during the summer. This arrangement may be the only one possible if parents live far apart. Particular care should be taken to prepare a preschooler for an extended visit.

~Continued~



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Printed 8/2008

An exchange of photo albums, letters between the two homes and regularly scheduled phone calls to the child will be helpful. Many parents think of special ways to create links for a child who "lives in two homes at once," as one child described her situation.

For example, Jessica Long was worried about her son Zack, who was 3-1/2 years old and spending three summer months with his father in California. Zack is a quiet, shy child who had rarely been away from Jessica. When his father lived nearby in New York, Zach saw him every Saturday, but now Zack had not seen his Dad for several months and had never met his father's new wife. Jessica wasn't able to have long discussions with her former husband, but she wanted very much to make Zack's transition as easy as possible.

She began by making a photo album of "Zack's Day." Included in the album were pictures of Zack getting out of bed and using the potty, eating breakfast (with a list of his favorite breakfast foods) and going through his daily routines, such as brushing his teeth, napping and bedtime rituals. Jessica included pictures of Zack feeding the family dog and putting his clean clothes away, so his father would get some sense of Zack's ability to accept responsibility. She also included snapshots of Zack at day care with his teachers and friends. The final picture in "Zack's Day" was of Zack cuddled in bed with the three stuffed animals and old baby blanket that are his security objects, with a brief written description of Zack's bedtime routine.

Jessica and Zack read his book many times together and Jessica told Zack the consistent message, "This is the way we do things here. At Daddy's house it will be fun to find some different ways to do things." As an example, she explained, "I always cut your peanut butter sandwich in triangles, but maybe at Daddy's house he will cut it in rectangles." When Zack protested, "But I like triangles," Jessica reassured him, "Just tell Daddy that. He'll want to know."

Jessica also began using a small tape recorder when she told Zack bedtime stories. Zack took the tapes with him on his trip. In addition to phone calls and letters, Jessica sent Zack a weekly tape with a brief message from her and a new story she told on the tape. This enabled Zack to hear his mother's voice whenever he wished. Sometimes Jessica sent Zack a paperback book to accompany a tape.

Although Jessica bought Zack one or two new items of clothing for his trip, she was careful to pack his favorite, familiar play clothes. She made sure that his stuffed animals and blanket were in his carry-on bag on the plane. Zack asked her to include a silky scarf of hers that he liked "because it smelled like Mommy." During the spring, Jessica consulted the local librarian about books on divorce, different family life styles and children who, like Zack, lived in "two homes at once." (Children's librarians can recommend many developmentally appropriate books on divorce and different kinds of families.) She began including these books in her reading sessions with Zack. None of the books mirrored Zack's situation exactly, and Jessica had to edit or adapt several, but they did provide opportunities for mother and son to discuss old questions and new possibilities. Zack seemed particularly interested in the "silly" books about "mixed-up families" such as "Annie's Four Grannies" and "The Trouble with Mom." Jessica thought Zack's uproarious laughter on hearing these stories provided a healthy way to reduce tension and stress.

Jessica's thoughtful planning and efforts on Zack's behalf paid off. His father read "Zack's Day" to him many times. At the end of the summer, Zack, with a beaming smile, shared a new snapshot album with his mother: "Zack's Day -- in California!"

Source: Jennifer Birckmayer, Department of Human Development, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.