

Moving Away from Your Child When You Are a Single Parent

Overview

Having a close relationship with your child when you live apart.

- If the non-custodial parent is moving
- If the custodial parent and child are moving
- Communicating after the move

Today, nearly one in three children is being raised by a single parent, and more than half of all children will spend part of their childhood in a single-parent home. It's very important to maintain a close relationship with your child even when you live apart. Moving can make this difficult but distance does not mean you can't be close to your child. There are many things you can do to make this transition easier on all family members.

If the non-custodial parent is moving

If you are a non-custodial parent who is moving away, it's important to:

- *Discuss the move ahead of time with the custodial parent.* A move can have an impact on parenting and custody issues. Clear these matters up before you move so you and your child know exactly what to expect.
- *Explain the move clearly to your child.* Give specific reasons (for example, a corporate transfer) to make it clear that you are not rejecting him.
- *Express love.* Make sure that your child understands she is loved, no matter where you live. Tell her clearly that you aren't moving because of anything she (or her other parent) did.
- *Anticipate visits.* Be sure to emphasize the good things about the area to which you are moving and talk about places to see on visits together. Share photos or history about where you are moving.
- *Set a date for a first visit.* Make specific plans to visit your child and give him a schedule of future visits.
- *Avoid talking about how lonely you will be without him.* It's OK for your child to know you will miss him, but he may feel worried or guilty if he thinks you will be miserable without him. He may also worry about feeling safe without you. Try to emphasize that life can be safe and happy when you are apart and when you are together, too.

If the custodial parent and child are moving

If you are a non-custodial parent and your child is relocating with her other parent, you will want to try to:

- *Be supportive and positive.* Your child may already be angry at her other parent and frightened about leaving familiar places and people for the unknown. It's important that both parents be reassuring to help your child feel secure.

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- *Avoid adding to your child's guilt.* He may feel guilty about leaving you, and displays of sadness can only make him feel worse.
- *Look ahead.* Talk about future visits and the fun you will have together.
- *Set a date for a first visit.* This will give your child something concrete to look forward to. Be sure to have a backup plan in the event that you or your child can't keep the date.

Communicating after the move

There are many ways to help you communicate with your child after the move.

- *Send postcards and letters with small gifts.* Tuck into your letters small items your child might like, such as cartoons, drawings, stickers, newspaper clippings, a baseball card, or a leaf from a tree that grows in your area.
- *Call regularly at scheduled times.* Coordinate your calls around homework and other activities.
- *Send photos and e-mail messages.* A child who has access to a cell phone or computer might like to get digital photos, communicate by Webcam, or keep in touch through e-mail or text messages.
- *Talk with an older child about whether social networks could help you keep in touch more often.* If you or your child has joined a social networking site such as Facebook (www.facebook.com) or MySpace (www.myspace.com), talk about whether it would be a good idea to add each other to your "friends" list. .
- *Exchange a journal or scrapbook with your child.* Start by jotting down notes and ideas, and include pictures your child may enjoy when she comes to visit. Let her take the scrapbook home so she can add her own stories or pictures to share with you the next time you get together. Or create an online journal or diary. There are free Internet sites to help you get started, such as mylifehereonearth.com and livejournal.com

It's also important to communicate with the other parent. Whatever your differences, try to keep each other up-to-date about big and small events in your child's life. Open communication allows both of you to enforce the same rules and avoid being played against each other.

If one of you is too angry or hurt to speak civilly, communicate through notes, e-mail, voicemail, or by other means such as through another adult or mediator. But never ask a child to deliver messages. Having your child serve as a "go-between" can make her feel like she is being forced to choose sides. Talk with a professional if you consistently have trouble communicating directly with the other parent. A therapist or other counselor can help you resolve feelings that are keeping you from putting your child's best interests first when dealing with the

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other parent. Ask your doctor for a referral to a professional who has experience with the concerns of single parents. Your employee assistance program (EAP) may be able to give you more information.

In order to help a child maintain a long-distance family relationship, both parents need to spend time listening and talking with him about his feelings, including pain, rejection, loss, and anger. But even if the other parent is sometimes uncooperative, you can still communicate with your child. By keeping in close contact, even during difficult times, a long-distance parent can build a meaningful, lasting relationship.

The program that provided this publication has additional resources on all aspects of being a single parent.

Written with the help of Andrea Engber. Ms. Engber is co-author of *The Complete Single Mother: Reassuring Answers to Your Most Challenging Concerns* (Adams, 2006) and founder and director of the National Organization of Single Mothers, Inc. (NOSM), a nonprofit resource for single mothers by choice or chance. Visit NOSM at www.singlemothers.org.