

PARENTING

A young child with curly brown hair and blue eyes, smiling and holding a white stuffed rabbit. The child is wearing a colorful patterned shirt. The background is plain white.

Sleep Tight!

Getting Your Kids To Call It a Night

What's America's Problem With Breastfeeding?

Buying That First Bike

Photo Contest Winners

Single Parents

THE THREAT TO SWITCH HOMES • MORE AND MORE CUSTODIAL DADS

WHEN YOUR CHILD WANTS OUT

"You're so mean! Dad is *much* nicer than you!" What custodial mother hasn't heard some version of this classic put-down at one point or another? And usually the kicker isn't far behind: "I want to go live with *him!*"

This cutting declaration may rattle even the toughest single mom, but before packing your child's bags or sending him to his room, remember that it usually isn't meant to be taken literally. True, it's important to treat a request of this nature seriously, but in many instances, a threat to move out is simply an expression of the underlying emotional conflict that accompanies a family breakup. Here, then, is a guide to some of the scenarios that typically arise in a postdivorce household, plus suggestions for how parents can handle them gracefully.

IT JUST HURTS "Many children are extremely angry after a divorce and need to lash out," explains Richard Warshak, a clinical psychologist in Dallas. This kind of raw emotion can surface at any time but is especially common in the first few months or even years after the split. The best approach, says Warshak, is to put aside your own anger about the divorce and talk directly with your child about what happened and what he's feeling. For very young children who may have trouble articulating their emotions, it helps to have them draw a picture of their family and talk about what it depicts.

PLAYING ON GUILT Sometimes a child's threat to move out is a subtle form of manipulation, according to clinical psychologist Antoinette Saunders of



Not to worry: A child's sudden plan to pack up and move in with Dad is most likely a temporary show of anger about the divorce.

Evanston, Illinois. He asks for a new bicycle, you refuse, and he knows he can up the ante by asking to live with Dad. Tempted as you may be to give in and buy him the bike, try not to, advises Saunders. Often a child in such a situation *wants* you to set limits, so calmly explain that you understand his feelings, that things may seem tough

and unfair to him right now, but that's no reason to jump ship. Usually the manipulation will stop once you take the matter in hand, Saunders says.

ABSENCE MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER One of the most common sources of friction in divorced families arises out of the typical custody situation. According to Warshak, the parent with physical

Fathers With Custody

True, the vast majority of custodial single parents are moms. But according to a study conducted at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, dads are increasingly vying for the position. Since 1974, the percentage of fathers with custody of their kids has doubled, so that men now head 15 percent of single-parent households.

What's causing the shift is a change in gender roles within the family, says Daniel Meyer, coauthor of the study. "Men are more involved in childrearing these days and a lot of women work outside the home, so custody arrangements tend to be more evenhanded."

Despite this trend, only 18 percent of custodial dads are awarded child-support payments, compared to 50 percent of custodial moms. The courts just don't tend to think of men as needing help, Meyer explains, especially in financial matters. Until judicial attitudes change, single fathers who could use the extra funds will simply have to fight harder.

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Sesame Street sign

two days." Not surprisingly, the child comes to see him as the perfect fantasy parent—the good guy Dad versus the bad guy Mom.

In cases like this, it's important to try to restore some balance to the relationships. If you live within a reasonable distance of your ex-spouse, revising the custody arrangement is the most logical way to do this. (You can renegotiate your custody settlement through a lawyer, but many couples prefer to make these changes informally on their own.) Try having the child alternate between Mom and Dad for two weeks at a time, or have him stay with his father for a few nights during the week and spend a couple of weekends a month with his mother.

If such give-and-take isn't an option, however, it helps to form a united front with your ex on important matters of discipline and house rules. Decide together what time your child should go to bed, for example, and what chores he should do at both homes. If relations with your ex are too strained for this kind of communication, at least explain to your child that if he lived full-time with the other parent, there would be rules and limits there, too.

IT'S A BOY THING Adolescence—particularly for boys—is a time when a child's wish to live with his father may reflect a genuine developmental need. "At 11 or 12, boys' hormones are raging, and they really need a role model to teach them about male issues," explains Saunders. "They want to know about sex, about how men relate to women, about how to date." It's not that Mom can't deal with these issues, but sometimes it's simply less threatening for young boys to hash them out with "one of the guys."

First, though, look for some temporary measures: Have your son take a vacation alone with his dad, or suggest that he live with him for a three-month trial period. Or you could consider a three-weeks-with-Dad, one-week-with-Mom living arrangement. **If you decide to let your child switch homes, it's important not to make him feel as if you think he's abandoned you. "Tell him that this is not an irreversible decision—that he's free to come back at any time if it doesn't work out," says Warshak. "And since the child himself may feel guilty about moving out, reassure him that you're not insulted."**

However bad such an exit may make you feel, try not to take it personally, and don't panic; it may only be temporary. In fact, kids often bounce back and forth between their parents during the teen years in order to maintain a rapport with both. In this as in most other postdivorce situations, your primary aim is to determine what's best for your child, but with flexibility and cooperation you should be able to find solutions to accommodate everyone. **MYRIAM WEISANG MISRACH**