



Dr. Richard Warshak

HOW TO BE A GOOD FATHER

EVEN WHEN YOU'RE NOT THERE

The number of fathers without custody of their children is increasing as divorce becomes more commonplace—and most (98%) custody cases are awarded to mothers.

For the children's sake: If you're a noncustodial father, continue being the best parent possible *with the help of your ex-spouse*. Studies show that after a divorce, children do best if their parents remain civil to one another and continue to *share* the duties of parenting. . . alternately. To be the best father—even when you're not there—follow these guidelines:

FOR THE NEARBY FATHER

- **Find a new home near your children, if possible.** This will ensure that you see them often.
- **Avoid the urge to be a "Disneyland dad."** It's not necessary or beneficial to keep every moment exciting and fun-filled.
- **Don't be overly permissive out of guilt over the divorce.** All children need discipline—whether they've seen their parents go through a divorce or not.
- **Give your children their own space in your home.** By having a place to keep an extra set of clothes and toys, your children will feel like members of your home rather than intruders.
- **Do household projects together.** Plant a garden, paint the exterior of your home or build some cabinets in the den. Make them ongoing activities to foster continuity so you can say "next time we'll. . ."
- **Have your children bring a friend when they visit.** In addition, introduce them to other children in your neighborhood.
- **Whenever you buy something for your home, keep your children in mind.** Stock up on their favorite foods. If you buy an umbrella, buy your children one as well. *Goal:* To

make them feel less like they're visiting and more like they live at your home.

- **Keep your promises.** If you say you'll take your children fishing, do so. If you say you'll help them with homework, sit down and do it. If you say you'll pick them up at ten in the morning, don't be late. A father who is cavalier in his promises comes across as uncaring.

- **Don't put your girlfriend before your children.** And if you want your children's respect, don't parade several different partners through your home. *Better:* Wait until you have an established relationship with a woman before having her join in outings with your children.

- **Be sensitive to your children's needs.** If something is bothering them, ask straightforward questions: Do you like our living arrangements here? Do you mind if my girlfriend goes with us to the movies? Do you have any questions you'd like to ask me?

- **Don't forget your children when you're traveling.** Call regularly and send postcards.

- **Let your children in on your life.** Talk about your work and hobbies so they know that you're a person of many dimensions and interests. . . not just a father.

- **Keep in touch with your children's teachers.** Give teachers a self-addressed stamped envelope so they can send you copies of your children's work and updates on their progress.

- **Maintain communication with your ex-spouse.** The better you get along, the more well-adjusted your children will be.

- **Revise child-sharing arrangements as your children get older.** Teenagers want to be with their friends and may have team practice or weekend sports events to attend. *Note:* They may also begin to feel uncom-

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fortable with the parent of the opposite sex. To ease this discomfort, have your friends over when your children visit or encourage your children to bring a friend.

FOR THE LONG-DISTANCE FATHER

Although it's difficult to maintain a close relationship with your children when you live far away from them, there are some creative things you can do to enhance your relationship:

- **Make your phone calls productive.** Jot down ahead of time all the things you'd like to discuss with your children aside from schoolwork. . . . which is an expected topic.
- **Make plans with your children to watch the same television program.** In your next phone call, discuss what you liked and disliked about the

program. This gives you a common experience to share.

- **Encourage your children to call you (especially when they have problems).**

- **Write letters.** Unlike a phone call, letters give your children something of yourself to hold on to. *Also:* Give your children stationery, pens and stamps to encourage them to write back.

- **Buy identical tape and video recorders for you and your children.** Send your children videotapes of your everyday activities—mowing your lawn, painting your house or taking a walk. Or record yourself reading their favorite bedtime stories. Refer to the tapes during phone calls. . . . record new videos from time to time.

- **Maintain continuity in your correspondence.** Don't make each letter, phone call or tape sound like you're in contact for the first time.

- **Don't tell your children how difficult it is to travel to see them.** If you spent nine hours on a train or two hours in airport traffic, keep it to yourself. Otherwise, you'll make your children feel guilty.

YOU AND YOUR EX-SPOUSE

No matter how hard you try to be a good noncustodial father, you'll face difficulty unless you and your ex-spouse cooperate:

- Put aside your anger.
- Stress the importance of the father/child and mother/child relationships to your children.
- Let your children go by the rules of the household they are living in at the moment.
- Have your children ready on time when the other parent picks them up.
- Don't schedule a conflicting activity with your children when it's your ex-spouse's turn to have them.
- Don't use your children as spies or messengers. If you have something to say to your spouse, either call or drop a note. If the atmosphere between you is too hostile, use your lawyer to relay a message. . . . not your children.
- Speak nicely of each other in the presence of your children.
- Fight your battles behind closed doors rather than in front of your children. If visits always cause fighting, your children will avoid them.
- Help your children do things for your ex-spouse such as picking out birthday gifts, making phone calls, etc.—without making them feel guilty.
- Be flexible. If one of you needs to cancel a visit, agree to another time.
- Keep each other informed of your children's problems and accomplishments.
- Maintain contact with both sets of your children's grandparents.
- Take turns vacationing with your children. ■■