Strategies for Separated Parents and Guardians

It’s helpful to refresh our understanding of the basics of good parenting etiquette while separated, especially at a time when the stresses of the pandemic might threaten to overwhelm us. Unanticipated challenges to keeping the same parenting schedules or attending to the needs of the children outside of their usual routines may give rise to new disputes. Children who are caught in the unresolved conflicts of their parents/guardians often feel helpless and anxious when their needs, views and experiences are ignored.

The social science research tells us that children want: “…to have a voice, to be listened to and heard; to have their views respected and believed; to be treated as individuals; to be told what is happening; to be given clear, age-appropriate information; flexibility in arrangements; decisions to be child-centered not adult convenient; and to say how they feel and what matters to them and how they see the future....”. Meeting the needs of a young person as circumstances change means including their views and thoughts in the discussions about responding to those changes.

For parents or guardians, there are common sense guidelines for parenting during a time of change and uncertainty:

1. Keep the lines of communication open between the parents/guardians.

   "Normally, my ex and I respect each other's distance. We don't really check in. But I've been texting daily, 'How are the kids?' I just want to hug and hold them a little closer."

2. Keep to the same schedule if you are sharing parenting duties (it’s less disruptive to the kids) unless one household experiences an illness. Make sure the rules in each household (social distancing, hand washing, sanitizing, healthy eating habits, cough into your sleeve) are similar or the same.

   “We are keeping everything the same so far”; "If he or his girlfriend gets sick, we’ve agreed that I’ll keep the kids at my house."

   "My ex is a public health professional, so he is aware of social distancing, but also of the importance of our daughter having access to both of her parents during such a fragile time”.

   "Understand that you and your co-parent may have different views about how to approach this pandemic and neither of you may be wrong or right, so it's important to be calm,” "Your child is also navigating a pandemic and a change in their everyday routine and you do not want to add to their stress and anxiety — a united front between the parents is best."

3. If you and the non-resident parent are not displaying coronavirus symptoms, allowing the children to have contact with the non-resident parent is reasonable,
but both you and the non-resident parent should be socially distancing from everybody else to avoid any spread of the virus.

4. If you are the primary parent and the children are out of school, consider arranging the parenting time schedule so that both parents can make use of the extra time when children are not in school.

5. Come up with a plan for safely transporting the children between two homes.

"Reach out to the other parent directly because hopefully the person who cares most about your children is the other parent. Identify what are the [coronavirus] risks and try to agree on that"

6. If there are temporary changes to your parenting plans, you can document that through an email exchange.

7. Ensure that communications between child & parent/grandparents/significant others are maintained.


9. Discuss ground rules you plan to set together for the benefit of the children to act in a way that conforms with government guidelines around coronavirus.

10. Keep up to date with government guidelines and be prepared to remain flexible so that you can make alternate plans in the event the guidelines change. www.healthlinkbc.ca

“…where court orders are in place, they need to be adhered to as much as possible: "You need to maintain the pattern within the court order, provided you can do so safely within the government’s coronavirus guidelines. This may mean several changes over time because the guidelines may change over the coming weeks."

11. If for any reason physical contact cannot take place between the children and non-resident parent, use other methods to ensure the children maintain their relationship with the non-resident parent.

12. Plan ahead when it comes to travel arrangements, holidays, or changes to the parenting time while schools are closed.
“Given the current travel restrictions you may also need to talk about cancelling holidays and making alternative arrangements. Working through all these issues now will reassure the children and avoid disappointment for everyone.”

13. Get whatever help you can to moderate disputes: Some professionals such as parenting coordinators http://www.bcparentingcoordinators.com/member-roster/ or mediators https://www.mediatebc.com/for-families/separation-and-divorce will work remotely to help resolve disputes. Family Justice Centres are maintained by the Province and are staffed with Family Justice Counselors who provide free mediation services https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/divorce/family-justice/who-can-help/family-justice-counsellors.


a. **Be Healthy**: Comply with all health regulations and stay informed…

b. **Be Mindful**: “Be honest about the seriousness of the pandemic but maintain a calm attitude. Avoid careless comments in front of your children and encourage them to ask questions.”

c. **Be Compliant**: “with Court orders and custody agreements”

d. **Be Creative**: “Expect to make plans to accommodate changing circumstances…”

e. **Be Transparent**: “Provide honest information to your co-parent about any suspected or confirmed exposure to the virus, and try to agree on what steps each of you will take to protect the child from exposure.”

f. **Be Generous**: “Try to provide makeup time to the parent who missed out, if at all possible. Family law judges expect reasonable accommodations.”

g. **Be Understanding**: “Adversity can become an opportunity for parents to come together and focus on what is best for the child. For many children, the strange days of the pandemic will leave vivid memories. It’s important for every child to know and remember that both parents did everything they could to explain what was happening and to keep their child safe.”
Resources:

www.healthlinkbc.ca

Birnbaum, Rachel and Saini, Michael “A scoping review of qualitative studies about children experiencing parental separation” Sage Publications 2012

The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family at the Symposium on the Children’s Participation in Justice Processes, September 2017, Calgary, Alberta


Seven Guidelines for Parents Who Are Divorced/Separated and Sharing Parenting Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic


http://www.bcparentingcoordinators.com/member-roster/

https://www.mediatebc.com/for-families/separation-and-divorce

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/divorce/family-justice/who-can-help/family-justice-counsellors

Sources:


