

Children and Access

Children need both their parents. They need to be allowed to see both of them, and they need to be allowed to love them. Regularly seeing the parent who leaves is vitally important for their emotional health -and also for their feelings about themselves. Children who, for one reason or another, lose contact with the absent parent not only suffer continuing unhappiness because of this, but they also feel rejected. They grow up feeling not good enough and unloveable. This makes them insecure, and it also affects their ability to make happy and lasting relationships when they are adults.

Seeing the absent parent is not necessarily a happy business at the beginning. Children have varied reactions. Sometimes it seems to open the wounds that are healing: they cry a lot before or afterwards, and seem to have trouble settling down. Other children behave badly and aggressively to one parent or another, during the visiting times or afterwards. All of this is quite natural, and with steadfast reassurance it passes.

But some parents believe that this means the access should stop. They think that it is less upsetting for the child not to see the absent parent. Either the parents at home forbid access, or the separated parents find the behaviour, and their own feelings, too hard to handle, so stop trying to see the children.

Although the children might seem superficially more settled in these circumstances, it is no solution. The children's feelings are driven underground, sometimes to become an enduring depression. Or they feel guilty about the consequences of their behaviour, which leads them to feel bad about themselves. However difficult the children are around - the time of access visits, the visits should still be allowed to continue. Tackling the children's feelings that lead to the bad behaviour can help. Acknowledge that you understand that they are feeling angry or sad, and ask them if they want to talk about it. It is not useful, however, to add your own feelings and observations at this time, if it means you criticising or accusing the other parent.

If the absent parent is violent or sexually abusive, the situation is more complicated. Surprisingly, even in these cases studies have shown that it is better if the children are able to maintain contact with the parent, although it is essential that the visits are supervised, and the parent is not left alone with the children. However inadequate or disappointing the absent parents are, children make better adjustments to the immediate situation -and are more emotionally and psychologically healthy in the long term -if they can continue to see them. There is more about handling access visits later in this chapter.

Your Children

Children who have the most frequent access to the absent parent often adjust much more easily. There is no such thing as too much access as far as the child is concerned, although this can be difficult for the parents.

Ultimately, you have to decide what pattern of access suits you best. Ideally, there should be a mixture of the absent parent seeing the children in their own home, taking them out, and staying at the absent parent's home. When you are living very far apart, the children might stay with the absent parent for longer periods, perhaps during the holidays. As children become older, there needs to be some flexibility in the arrangements. The children need to be involved in planning visits, and have the option to change some of them to accommodate plans of their own. Frequent telephone calls or letters when it is difficult to meet also help.

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