

Back-to-School: When Mommy & Daddy are Divorced

If you are a parent who is separated or divorced, make a vow to keep the excitement where it should be for your children and not bring your drama to their place of learning. Some tips:

1. FREELY SHARE INFORMATION REGARDING SCHOOL EVENTS & RECORDS.

Your duty as a parent is to ensure that your child feels support and encouragement in his or her efforts. Put a folder in your child's backpack and mark one pocket "Mom" and the other pocket "Dad." Encourage your child's teachers to put fliers in both pockets so that both parents receive information about upcoming events. Your child will glow when he looks at the crowd at the school band concert and see both Mom and Dad there to hear him play. Bonus points if Mom and Dad are mature enough to cordially sit next to each other.

And, share in your child's accomplishments. If Mom can't make a school assembly where an award is received, your daughter will cherish the photo that you take of her to send to Mom because "Mom and I are both so proud of your efforts!"

Most schools in the area send out their school and class announcements electronically. Ensure that the other parent's email is also registered with this system. This way, both parents can be kept abreast about spirit days, read-a-thons, and other such events that should be encouraged at both homes. Don't punish your child by making him the only one who doesn't show up to school with a hat on Silly Hat Day just to prove your point that Dad never reads his emails.

Smart phones also make it simple to share information. Take a quick snapshot of the birthday invitation that your child received and send it to the other parent. This way your son doesn't miss out on the party at the skating rink simply because it is Mom's weekend and Dad didn't let Mom know about the party. Avoid game-playing that ultimately punishes the child.

2. COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS.

Teachers and school staff are already overworked. Don't increase their workload by asking them to referee parental disputes.

Put on your Big Boy Pants and Big Girl Pants and attend parent-teacher conferences together. Don't demand separate conference because you lack the emotional maturity to sit in a room for twenty minutes with your ex. Nothing spins an unnecessary parental conflict out of control faster than one parent claiming that the teacher said something adverse that only happens at the other parent's home. Avoid all such allegations by hearing the same information at the same time from the same speaker.

When your child's teacher does bring up a concern, avoid finger-pointing. Save your trash-talk for martinis with the girls. Work together to come up with a shared solution for your child's sake.

Consistency is key when children are living in two homes. When there is an issue that requires an email to or from the teacher, be sure to CC the other parent. Your child will benefit when both parents are working together.

3. LEAVE TRIXIE AT HOME.

The back-to-school ice cream social is not the time to introduce the world to your new girlfriend and Mom's new husband doesn't need to attend and interject at Meet the Teacher Night. Significant others need to learn from the outset of the relationship that they are bonus parents, but not decision-makers. When a significant other attends an event and the other parent comes alone, a "two against one" dynamic is formed. Leave the SO at home and talk to your co-parent about the weather, the Royals, or your kid. Practice the healthy communication skills that you want to model for your own child.

4. BITE YOUR TONGUE.

What I'm about to say may be shocking: No one cares that you and your ex don't get along. Don't air your dirty laundry at your kid's school.

The school secretary doesn't need to hear that Dad never ensures that Junior gets to the dentist, allergist, orthodontist, etc. The school nurse doesn't need to know that Mom cheated on you with her assistant. Your child's teacher doesn't need to know that Sally's homework probably won't get done on Dad's parenting time because Dad once admitted to looking at pornography.

5. SHOW AND TELL.

Often time, school projects will center on the child's definition of her family. When your child's project requires her to make such a project, help her to create one that represents both homes. Even if tensions are strained between the adults, her family now includes more people who love her. This is a good thing.

If you really want to "win" in the battle of the parents contest, put your energy into being the best parent possible. Volunteer for field trips. Encourage your child to feel and receive love from the other parent. Bring your child a special lunch at school. Be the class surprise reader. Cultivate experiences that reassure your child that she doesn't have to choose between Mom or Dad. Snuggle him tightly at night and give him focused attention. Coach your child's sports team.

A true win is when your child knows that it is okay to love and be loved by both parents.