

Divorced? Have a 100% relationship with your kids

Post separation, even if you achieve 50/50 residential time-sharing, will you have a 100% meaningful relationship with your child?

Some parents believe joint custody is about sharing the kids 50/50 and they fight strenuously to achieve this. Trouble is, kids can't be cut in half. Wise old King Solomon knew that back in 950 B.C.

As the story goes, two women came to Solomon, each claiming to be the mother of a baby boy. They sought his direction on who should continue to parent the child. They both argued their case strenuously. Finally, Solomon arrived at a solution. He ordered that the child be cut in two. With his order in hand, one of the two women stepped forward and relinquished her claim to the child. She understood that to cut the child in two would result in his death. Upon hearing her change of position, Solomon recognized her as the true mother and awarded her the child.

Many separated parents fight believing that only a rigid 50/50 residential sharing of the child is fair and will provide for their ongoing relationship. As the parents fight over the issue of time, the concept of meaningfulness is lost. From the child's perspective, what is meaningful is not equal distribution of time. Rather, important to the child is the nature, quality and purpose of time together with family members. You can win 50/50 residence, but never succeed in a meaningful relationship with your child. You can win the battle, yet lose the war.

In the end, parents may well be advised to worry less about 50/50 time-sharing and more about meaningfulness - the nature, quality and purpose of time together with their kids. It is this meaningfulness that the child will use to determine their lifelong relationship to each parent as time goes on.

Meaningfulness to the child is determined by how well each parent protects them from parental conflict and how each parent participates in matters of concern to the child (as opposed to the parent). From the child's perspective, meaningful is who takes them to sports practice at 5:30 in the morning; who helps them with

their math; who corrects them when they are out of line; who acts with good moral character.

For separated parents, starting with the needs of the child, each parent can assume responsibilities, sometimes based upon past patterns and at other times based upon newly negotiated responsibilities. The issue is determining how to support the child according to the child's developmental needs and activities. This won't always make for a week clearly defined by alternate weekends and mid week visits. Rather it can be a week determined by soccer, swimming, ballet and homework. This will take some flexibility.

In the eyes of the child, the parent's involvement will be meaningful as opposed to conflict laden. Worrying less about 50/50 and more about the child's needs, the parents may find that the actual time varies from week to week or month to month, sometimes favouring one parent, then the other. The child's experience is parents who are mutually available when necessary. The child doesn't have to miss an event because they are with one parent or the other. Extra-curricular activities are not used as weapons to exclude either parent but as a structure to organize each parent's time with the child. Parent and child can concentrate on enjoying each other's company. This way both parents can experience a 100% meaningful relationship with the child.

Joint custody is about parents sharing responsibilities and decision-making authority. The actual relationship with the children will be more meaningful based more upon the nature, quality and purpose of time together rather than equal time spent. Work it out accordingly and the children will thrive.

Need help structuring a parenting plan? Find the Parenting Plan Worksheet on this page:
www.yoursocialworker.com/sep-dev.htm

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker in private practice. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider Gary an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report.

Call Gary for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.