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Mom's house, Dad's house

By Isolina Ricci, Ph. D.

If you ask their opinion, children will almost always choose a two-parent, two-home alternative over a one-home arrangement with the other parent as a visitor or -- worse yet -- gone from the scene entirely. Here's how to meet the challenges of setting up two happy homes for your children.

Parents who set up two homes for their children often make comments like "It made me feel I was a real parent again" or "I knew what I was doing and the children could feel it." When necessary steps are taken to reclaim certain responsibilities for our children, normal parenting is resumed. We can break through some of these sex-typed barriers that have said that men cannot be nurturing and responsive or that mothers who set up another home have "given up their children" and have something intrinsically wrong with them.

When parents establish a working relationship, their children can feel that Mom and Dad are on top of this life crisis and that things are going to be okay. Then even perhaps, "Uh-oh, I guess that also means they are each going to get my report card!"



A Sense Of Belonging: My Own Things

The common grumble of parents when children return from being with their other parent is that some item -- a favorite toy or a jacket -- has been left behind. The first, knee-jerk reaction becomes: the other parent or the child has been inconsiderate, thoughtless, or deliberately provoking. Actually, this forgetfulness probably stems from the child's need to stake a claim to some territory to create a sense of belonging in his or her newer home.

Children will know they belong in two homes when they no longer need a large suitcase to go from one home to another. This holds true no matter how much or how little time they spend in one home. The time spent doesn't matter, the sense of belonging does.

Children need their own space and are entitled to privacy. Even a drawer they share at the bottom of their parent's dresser can help. They need their own nontransferable toilet articles and two or three changes of clothes. They need their own place for toys and personal effects and a place to sleep. Some personal things belong in each home and stay there. Sleeping bags rolled up in a closet can be good beds if these are their own sleeping bags. A house, a yard, and an extra bedroom are just trimmings. The sense of "my own things, here" matters. So does a trust that their things will remain protected in their absence.

Many dual-home parents simply take their offspring shopping for new clothing, sleeping bags, and toilet articles. These purchases offer a way to participate in the organization of their new, other home. When money is very tight, perhaps parents can agree on which of the child's articles of clothing and personal belongings can be transferred permanently from one home to the other. Whenever possible, honor the children's preferences. If they want to carry their favorite pajamas back and forth, let them. They may change their minds after a week or two and make a switch. This maneuver usually tests out Mom's and Dad's reactions, a trial-and-error way to learn what will feel best but also what the parents will accept. Allow reasonable time to try out different schemes; observe what is easy and comfortable for the children and then agree on rules. "Usually one or two things transfer," said one parent. "Our eldest wears the same hat back and forth. Our youngest carries his blanket and teddy bear." Remember, when your children have their clothes and things in two homes you also get rid of the "suitcase conversation" with the other parent.

Ground Work

Groundwork designates the time parent and child take walking together around the new home(s), exploring, familiarizing themselves with landmarks, meeting neighbors and potential playmates, discovering busy streets, and -- most important -- determining boundaries for roaming without an adult. Groundwork is the most basic settling-in work that the parent and child must do in a new neighborhood, but it is often the most ignored task of parenting. It takes no more than an hour and should be done by each parent at each home. Benefits are widespread and long-lasting.

Lecturing the child as you march over the ground won't do the job. Nor is this an activity to be delegated to nannies or sitters. Parent and child do it together. As with other shared activities, your child has an opportunity to tell you what he or she thinks. Groundwork promotes a sense of security and can also show the neighbors that you are a caring parent.

One parent admitted her shame at living in the same place for four years and never walking the neighborhood with her daughters. "I

realized I had been a four-wheel parent; if I didn't see it from the car coming into our driveway or going out of it, it didn't exist. I didn't know the names of my neighbors two houses down!" When the parent walks these routes with the children, he or she can exchange phone numbers with parents of potential playmates and friendly local merchants. When Dad sends Eric to the store or neighborhood market for bread and Eric has not returned after a reasonable time, Dad -- because he took a minute to get the market's number and to introduce Eric to the manager -- can phone and ask if Eric has been there.

Such groundwork establishes an automatic neighborhood watch for your children. Children gain a sense of security and of belonging; their parents gain peace of mind and real information about the neighborhood. Groundwork may take a few hours, but it pays off again and again in security and continuity for you and your children.

Healthy Parenting Patterns

1. Parents frequently share information about their child. Written notes, voice mail, and e-mail often substitute for one-on-one talks.
2. Parents' communications are respectful, usually businesslike and direct. No verbal messages are sent through the children.
3. Parents keep the child out of the middle of their problems with one another, and there is no neighborhood "soap opera."
4. Each parent supports the other parent's relationship with the child and helps the child feel free to love both of them.
5. Parents provide the child the environment, support, and love to develop normally -- physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Order In The House

A predictable, orderly structure for at least some things is especially important when people are in crisis or having a difficult time. Parents feeling anxious, sad, remorseful, or angry can let daily routines and household organization go downhill rapidly during their own times of crisis. A little occupational therapy is in order. Pick yourself up and recover a bare minimum working order in your house. Establish a routine everyone follows for getting ready in the morning, preparing and eating meals, doing homework, buying groceries and gas, transporting kids to school or to Little League, for rest and play, and for going to bed. Everyone needs to know what to expect.

Paying attention to household management may sound like a dull remedy for the aches and pains of separation or depression, but both common sense and research support this approach as fundamental to calming fears and to the development of a new stability. A sensible routine, with regular meals and regular times for shared recreation, translates into "home," being cared about, and a sense of security. "Knowing my kids needed that routine forced me to be orderly for at least part of my week," said John. "Even when I didn't think I could make dinner or read that bedtime story, I did it. It actually did make things easier -- not only for them, but for me, too."

This family and others who ordered their lives early on -- despite their difficulties -- seem to have an easier time of readjusting overall. A sensible routine not only feels safe, it also allows our minds and bodies to calm down and heal.

House Rules And Your Parenting Style

Parenting apart means setting up your own House Rules and settling into your own style. This can be liberating, especially if you felt the other parent used to look over your shoulder too much. More than one parent, often the father, has reported that he is enjoying his children more and feeling a rapport and depth of feeling for them that had escaped him earlier.

You can start with House Rules that reflect your expectations as well as those of the children. "If I want to take the phone off the hook during dinner, I can." "If I want to have a quiet period for reading or headphone stereo listening after nine p.m., I can write it into the blueprint." Some advice: if your natural inclination is to be a relaxed and permissive parent, consider tightening up with a routine at least during your first year. Many children interpret limits as a reflection of their parents' personal stability and as a caring for their well-being. You can provide the leadership for a set of House Rules reached in a family powwow that promotes safety, health, and privacy for everyone. These House Rules can be revised anytime you think is wise.

House Rules At The Other Home

Common sense tells you that the more House Rules you have in common with the other parent, the better. It's less confusing to the children and more supportive for the parents. But it would be rare for both parents to have exactly the same House Rules. Try to have the same or close to the same rules for the main organization of the child's day -- for example, bedtime periods, when to do homework, TV watching, and curfews.

Eating Meals Together

Do it. Families that eat together usually do better, especially the children. This is a time to ask about how the day went, to share jokes, ideas, hardships, hopes. To be acknowledged, listened to, and listen to others is to feel like a family. Turn off the TV. This is the time to talk together, even if the kids aren't all that interested. They will be, eventually.

Safety Rules

Each home, regardless of how the children's time is divided, has basic safety needs. You need a clearly legible list of important numbers: the doctor's, friends', and neighbors', as well as numbers for emergency, fire, and police. Parents should familiarize children with fire escapes, routes in case of earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, fire, or other disasters. Set up meeting places for the family if separated. Please do not overlook these essential routines. There's no need to alarm very young children

with details of such information. But they should memorize their own addresses and last names, phone numbers, and the names of other family or friends to call in an emergency.

Family Work

No home can function without somebody doing the work. Besides being necessary, this work can help build security and solidity for the new family's self-image -- especially when the parent and children work together. When the parent scrubs the sink, the eight-year-old daughter puts away the dishes, and the ten-year-old vacuums, the burden of housework is lightened by teamwork and the growth of a new family feeling.

Participation builds solidarity, as all athletes who play team sports know well. Children of any age need the satisfaction of doing a job in cooperation with Mom or Dad. Children's family work is not a form of cheap labor for unpleasant tasks, but a preparation for an independent life as an adult. Completed tasks remind children that they belong; that they are functioning family members, trusted, appreciated, and most of all, needed to keep the household running. "I feel guilty having the children do work," said a parent. His misplaced guilt won't make them feel at home, but simple tasks and the resumption of a more realistic parenting pattern will.

Children in divorced families often grow more realistic about the relationship between caring and sharing, about how things get done in the grownup world. When children help cook meals, do the laundry, clean the house, shop, and eat the meal they helped prepare, they know what their work accomplished. A sense of mastery and increased self-confidence can grow. Children such as these seem to be more independent at an earlier age than are children from families that have never faced adversity or reorganization.

How decisions are made about family work and family rules is different in each family. Some parents prefer to make all the decisions, others allow their children to decide. A good midpoint leaves certain areas open to discussion, but the parent reserves the right to make the final decisions, while the other areas are discussed openly by all with each child's preference given as much priority as possible.



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