

Tips for Fathers in Custody Disputes

What you can't do when a custody battle is brewing, is "nothing". Recognize that divorce changes the roles for everyone and that you need to get familiar with your children's schedules, activities, and schools.

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Divorces are sad and hard on for everybody in the family, including the dog. This is especially true in historically "traditional" households where mom primarily stays home with the kids and cares for the house and the dog and picks the curtains and sets the play dates and dentist appointments and makes the lunches, and volunteers at the school... while dad works long hours to pay for the house, the dog, the curtains, the braces, the groceries, the play dates, the private school....

In this family model, the Dad relies on the Mom to update him on the days' happenings. She fills him in on the kids' schedule and needs, she tells him everything from "how it went at the orthodontist" to the size of the new shoes she just bought for their toddler. Armed with his update, Dad comes home from work, tells the toddler how pretty her new sparkly shoes are and makes her squeal while he tickles her and tells her what a big girl she is. He then asks his middle-schooler how the orthodontist visit went and they both laugh when she smiles to shows him her new lime and orange rubber band combo. Sound familiar? This division of labor works amazingly well when the parenting team is intact — when each team member knows his role and plays his position. However, when the team splits up and a divorce and custody battle ensues...yikes! Now mom has done everything for the children and dad does nothing. He never takes them to the doctor for their check ups, doesn't know their teachers and only ever cooks pancakes (and only on Pancake Sundays). Sure the kids adore him and think he's an awesome Dad but Mom says that's because of how she worked to keep him in the know. Without her (and he is in fact without her now) he knows nothing about the kids, how can he care for them, he works all the time...and so on...

So here's the part where we come to the tips section. This situation is not insurmountable. In fact with a little effort and purpose, you can change the situation easily and forever. What you can't do when a custody battle is brewing, is "nothing". Recognize that divorce changes the roles for everybody. Mom will most likely have to get a job and figure out how to balance working and mothering. Dad has to figure out how to balance working with fathering. Here are some steps that will help protect your parental rights and bring you up to speed on your children at the same time:

Get familiar with your children's school. This can be done at anytime. Start tomorrow if you can.

- Know the name of your child's teachers.

- Visit your child's school.
- Meet with their teacher.
- Arrange to meet the teacher monthly if your child needs additional attention and you want to stay abreast of progress.
- Know how they are doing in school...are they turning in homework, are they doing well, how are they getting along with the other kids, Do they seem happy or sad or quiet now that things are changing at home?
- Let the teacher know that they can call you at anytime at that you are 100 percent interested in how your child is doing.
- Sign up to be a chaperone on a field trip... just one if it's not really your time or you don't have time. It gives the teachers a chance to know you in a more child centered social setting and gives you an opportunity to shine as a parent to both the teachers and your child.
- Make sure the school has your address and contact info if it has changed.
- Make sure you are on the emergency contact list.
- Make sure you are set up in their system to get report cards, notices etc.

Medical Providers

- Know the name and location of your child's doctor's, dentists, therapists etc.
- Try to attend routine checkups if you can. If Mom is still the primary scheduler, ask her to schedule the annual checks ups at a time when you can both attend.
- For appointments that occur during your parenting time, plan to take them to the visits yourself as often as you can.
- Purpose to introduce yourself to all of their providers even if they do not have check ups in the near future.
- Let their providers know they can contact you anytime and that you are 100 percent interested in how your child is doing.
- If your child has ongoing scheduled treatments, ask questions and get up to date on the treatment plan and follow your child's progress.
- Make sure the medical provider has your address and contact info if it has changed.
- Make sure you are on the emergency contact list.
- Make sure you are set up in their system to get appointment notices etc.

- Some medical providers do not like to be involved in bitter custody battles so keep them out of the fighting. You just want to be an informed, involved Dad. You don't need to bad mouth Mom to do this. Just be your best you!

Agreed Upon Extracurricular Activities

- Know what activities they are signed up for.
- Meet the coaches and the ballet teachers and the tutors.
- Take them to practices that occur during your parenting time.
- Attend their activities, games and performances whether they occur during your parenting time or not. This is an awesome opportunity to see your kid outside of your regular parenting time and enjoy their football games or their recitals. To avoid the tension between you and Mom, introduce yourself to other lone Dad's at the games and still cheer your child on. By doing this you communicate that your child STILL has his or her two biggest fans and that you are both still on their team!

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