

4 Vital Steps When Renewing Contact Between Parents and Children

Losing contact with a parent after a divorce or separation can be traumatic for a child. Whether the relationship was previously secure or not, suddenly no longer seeing or hearing from a parent can have long-lasting consequences.

For some families, though, this absence may be temporary. While gaining the ability to form relationships with both parents is generally seen as a positive—as long as there is no history of violence or abuse—having the child’s other parent suddenly re-enter the picture can be disorienting. Many custodial parents in this situation are understandably worried about the ramifications, especially regarding how it will affect their child or if they can count on the change to be permanent.

For the parent re-entering their children’s lives, the process can bring a complicated mixture of joy, impatience, and grief. Joy for being a part of their child’s life again. Impatience that their bonds with children must be built slowly. And grief for the time they were apart, no matter the choices or circumstances that led to that absence.

Like with any other parenting effort after a divorce or separation, this process will require a team effort. To prepare for success, here are 4 key things that both custodial and returning parents should consider.

Understand any and all legal considerations

Custodial Parent

Many custodial parents choose to petition for sole custody when their child’s other parent refuses or is unable to participate in their children’s lives. This sole custody may have come with guidelines from the court for visitation between children and the non-custodial parent, but after a long absence, a visitation schedule built for a previously present parent will likely no longer be appropriate.

Custodial parents should consult legal representation as soon as they are able once their child's other parent informs them of their interest in reunification. A family law attorney will be able to answer your questions and help you craft a plan for moving forward.

Returning Parent

As soon as you've made the decision to try to re-enter your children's lives, you should speak with a family lawyer in your area about your rights and responsibilities.

Part of the process of returning to your parental role is displaying through your actions that you are committed to the responsibility of raising children. That means addressing any outstanding obligations, such as lapsed child maintenance payments.

Make every effort to work collaboratively with the custodial parent to come to an agreement that puts the health and happiness of the children at the centre.

Have a clear plan that takes things slowly

Custodial Parent

Working with your legal representation and your child's other parent, have a clear plan in place for contact between your children and the returning parent.

While these plans will vary from family to family, they should always prioritize a slow and steady pace. Having a parent re-enter their lives is a big change for children, and they need to be able to rely on their regular routine as a constant.

Questions your plan should answer:

- **How** frequently will there be contact between children and the returning parent? Many families begin with occasional midday visitations before eventually moving onto overnights, if appropriate.
- **Will** that contact need to be supervised?
- **How** will the returning parent be incorporated into the normal swing of things? For example, communication about attending sporting events, school plays, and other important dates.
- **How** will you, the custodial parent, communicate other information to the returning parent? What information will be communicated? Think of whether phone calls/email would be appropriate or if you'll need a more structured program like an App.
- **When** will the contact schedule be reassessed for any necessary updates?

Returning Parent

Once you've made the first steps to re-enter your children's lives, it can be all too easy to let your excitement turn into impatience and a desire to rush the process. In the long run, this can do more harm than good, as children and the custodial parent may balk at being asked too much too quickly.

If you and the custodial parent are working with best interests of your child or children in mind, you can be confident that a conservative schedule is not a punishment, but an effort to build long-term bonds.

Be mindful of your and others' emotions

Custodial Parent

It's incredibly common for custodial parents to feel some level of resentment toward their child's absent parent. Those feelings can make reunification efforts jarring and uncomfortable, and it can be hard to see through the anger and frustration to find a way forward.

But while those feelings are understandable, protecting children from being influenced by your own views of their other parent is absolutely vital. Whether your child is feeling cautious, ambivalent, or excited about the possibility of building a new relationship with their other parent, their outlook should not be overly influenced by any negative feelings you may be experiencing.

You should also make sure to regularly check in with your children about their own emotions and mindset. If your child is older, you'll be able to discuss how they feel the whole affair is proceeding. Do they think things need to slow down? Or do they wish their other parent was involved in more or other activities? Ask questions and, when it's appropriate, use their input to help shape your efforts.

Returning Parent

As the returning parent, you may be feeling apprehensive about how the process will proceed. You may be worried about how you and/or your absence has been talked about between the custodial parent and your child.

While it's normal to feel nervous, it's incredibly important to be empathetic of the custodial parent's position and point of view. Your child's other parent has not only been doing the heavy lifting of day-to-day care but also of helping your children deal with your absence.

They've likely been fielding questions from your children about where you are and whether you will be coming back into their lives. Your desire to become an active part of your children's lives can be a step in the right direction, but it needs to be coupled with a keen sense and understanding of what your family has been through.

Approach your reunification efforts with care and responsibility. And never take out your frustrations or worries on the custodial parent or your children.

Get outside help

Custodial Parent

Having a previously absent parent return is a complicated process that will be accompanied by even more complicated emotions, for both you and your children. If counselling is an available and viable option for you, take advantage of that and work with a therapist to process what's happening.

Returning Parent

Similar to the custodial parent and your children, you may also be experiencing a tumult of raw and confusing emotions. Counselling can not only help you understand these emotions but also give you empathy tools for understanding the mind-frame of your children and the custodial parent.

But besides counselling and mental health services, it may also be worth your time to enrol in parenting skills classes. These classes, which can be taken in-person or online, can provide invaluable insights into raising children at any stage, infant to teenager. Skills taught in these classes cover topics such as getting children proper nutrition, teaching them about money management, and everything in between.

The process of a parent coming back into a child's life is a complicated one, and as such, it must be approached with care.

Work with legal representation to make sure all of your bases are covered and you're approaching the situation responsibly. With their help, outline a clear plan that takes things slowly and gives your family room to grow. And because emotions will be running high, parents should enlist the aid of mental health professionals, when possible, to help process strong feelings and anxieties.

The stakes are high for a child who is suddenly able to form a relationship with a previously absent parent, so both parents—custodial and returning—should keep their eyes on the ball and do their utmost to put their health and happiness at the forefront.

NOTE: Many state and federal laws use terms like 'custody' when referring to arrangements regarding parenting time and decision-making for a child. While this has been the case for many years, these are not the only terms currently used to refer to these topics.

Today, many family law practitioners and even laws within certain states use terms such as 'parenting arrangements' or 'parenting responsibility,' among others, when referring to matters surrounding legal and physical child custody