

IF YOU HAVE NO CONTACT WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Sean and Elizabeth were married for two years and had a one-year-old daughter, Jenna. They had their divorce finalized, with the court saying Sean was unfit to parent.

Sean had problems before and after the divorce. He got involved with drugs and in some criminal activity. He went to prison for two years. While in prison he got drug treatment and participated in counseling. He took classes and when he was released from prison, he got a good job. He waited a year before attempting to see Jenna, because he wanted to be sure he was stable and could be a positive influence in her life.

When Jenna was seven, Sean tried to contact Elizabeth and reestablish a relationship with Jenna. Elizabeth would not return his calls and contacted her attorney. She set about finding everything negative about Sean that she could and filed a declaration.

He hired an attorney, and the parties returned to court. Sean brought verification of the progress he had made. The court ordered that Sean and Jenna participate in reunification therapy for at least six sessions. Once the therapist thought they were ready, Sean and Jenna could begin supervised visitation. Elizabeth was furious and went home and told Jenna that she had to attend therapy.

Sadly, there are those occasions when one parent cannot have contact with their children. That could be due to a high hostility quotient in the other parent, geographical distance, schedule conflict, or other reason not based on a court order. So long as you are allowed some sort of contact with the children, it is important for you to communicate consistently. Let your children know that you love them and you will always be available for them. There may eventually be a tipping point when you gain more access. Always choose love of your child rather than retribution.

When children have no contact with one of their parents because that parent dropped out of their lives, those children may decide that it is their fault and that they are unlovable. It can be difficult for them to understand that it is not their fault. Explain to them, in an age appropriate way, that their co-parent is having a difficult time right now and not seeing them has nothing to do with them. Do this in a kind non-blaming way.

If a parent has had no contact with their children for an extended period, the court may order reunification counseling. This is done by a therapist who is very experienced in dealing with high conflict co-parenting cases. The therapist will meet with each parent and child individually to learn everyone's perspective of the situation before meeting with the estranged parent and child together. This gives the child an opportunity to get reacquainted with the parent and address any troubling issues in a safe environment. The length of the process will depend on many things, such as the length of the estrangement and the issues involved. Sometimes, the therapist may want to involve the residential parent in that process.

The focus of reunification counseling is always the best interest of the child. The goal is for the child to have a healthy relationship with both parents. Ideally it takes the cooperation of both parents for the counseling to be successful.

If you are the primary parent and your child has not had contact with their other parent, it is very important that you not interfere with that process. No matter how angry you are with that parent your child deserves the opportunity to get to know her parent and make up her own mind about him. Saying things like you get to go see your dad today, instead of you have to go see your dad today can have a big impact. Don't make your child feel responsible for your feelings. That will backfire on you in the end. As we said earlier, children who hear negative things about one parent from the other parent grow up to resent the parent who spoke the negative things.

Parent alienation has become a very frequent allegation in highly contested custody cases. There is much controversy about diagnoses of parent alienation.

PARENTAL ALIENATION

Symptoms of an alienated child:

- The child cannot think of one positive thing about the alienated parent.
- Despite expressing fear of the alienated parent, the child is willing to attack that parent and say hateful things.
- The child can produce no happy memories of time with the alienated parent.
- The child is unwilling to entertain any positive feedback about the alienated parent.

Here are some hints for the Alienated Parent:

1. Always let your children know you love them no matter what.
2. Act naturally and be yourself when you are with your children. Your actions will eventually speak louder than their other parent's words.
3. Never stop trying to contact your children. Keep a record of all of your attempts.
4. Make your time with the children memorable. Be present with them. Be interested in them. Plan activities when you can spend time interacting.
5. Don't blame your children for their behavior. Your children are victims of the situation. There may be requirements that they behave in a specific way. They may be asked to spy on you and report to their other parent. It's not their fault.
6. Use self-control and stay positive. Never under any circumstances badmouth your children's other parent.
7. Always attempt to follow through with plans no matter what. If you don't, it may be used against you.
8. Never retaliate.
9. Never give up.
10. Always show up to get the children, even if you know they won't be there.
11. Never under any circumstances show the children court documents.
12. Never under any circumstances attempt to gather information about your children's other parent.

13. Always acknowledge your children's birthdays, Christmas, and other special occasions. Keep a record of all your attempts. Sending gifts and cards by certified mail will give you documentation that you tried to acknowledge these occasions even if the gifts and cards are refused.
14. When you are with your children, hold back from arguing and criticizing.
15. Don't talk to the children about being brainwashed. Concentrate on having a good time with them.
16. Give your children options of things to do. Let them choose. Value their input.
17. Listen to them empathetically. Put yourself in their shoes. Offer responses like "I see your point." "Oh, I never thought about that."

Here are some tips for the favored parent to facilitate the reunification process:

1. Be encouraging of the process. When it's time for the children to see their other parent say things in an upbeat voice, like "you get to see your mom today," instead of, "you have to see your mom today."
2. Never say anything to imply the children will not be safe. Saying things like "don't worry the counselor will protect you" implies that it's not safe.
3. Don't interrogate the child about what went on in the counseling session.
4. Never bad-mouth the other parent. Children deserve to make their own judgments about their parent.
5. Don't hold back gifts and messages from the other parent.
6. Don't fill your own emotional needs at the expense of the other parent.
7. Never allow your children to degrade or disrespect the other parent.
8. Don't plan exciting activities when it's time for the children to visit the other parent.
9. Don't give decision-making authority to the child when it's time to visit the other parent. Don't let them think they can break a court order.
10. Don't act as if the child has betrayed you when the child talks or acts positively about the other parent.
11. Don't use the child as a messenger or a spy.
12. Don't ask the children to lie to the other parent.
13. Don't share custody legal papers with the children.
14. Don't tell the children that you can't afford things because the other parent doesn't pay support or enough support.
15. When your child is visiting the other parent, don't bombard him with texts and telephone calls.
16. Remember a child cannot have too much love.

After completing the following assignments, you can move on to the Module Eleven Quiz.

1. If you are going to see your child after a long separation be prepared. Write down what you want to tell him. It is helpful to bring some pictures of times when you were together and to have some happy memories to talk about.
2. If you haven't seen your child because of negative circumstances in your life, rehearse talking about that in an age appropriate way.

3. Be very careful not to say anything negative about the other parent. If your relationship with your child is tenuous, bad-mouthing the other parent while getting reacquainted with the child could be the tipping point in the success of the reunification process.