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How to Make Shuttling Between Households Easier

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The Stepfamily Foundation of Alberta

Shuttling between different households is the norm for many children living in stepfamilies. These “transitions” can be exceptionally trying for everyone involved. Following are a number of strategies you can use to minimize difficulties that are likely to appear at these times:

1. Once a "visitation schedule" is in place, **STICK TO IT**. As difficult as it may be, do your best to resist invitations, suggestions and pleas to be "flexible" or "accommodating". Rest assured, departing from the explicit terms of the schedule will open up your family to intrusion and chaos that will be a lot harder to deal with than being firm with the schedule from the outset.

Tip: The kids involved will be much happier if their schedule is not always being disrupted by “last minute” changes.

2. Post a calendar reflecting the schedule on the fridge. Explain it to the kids. Use icons or pictures to help younger children understand where they will be residing. After providing your best explanation, tell the kids that, if they have questions, they can come to you, and that you will do your level best to answer them honestly and completely.

Tip: Giving the kids knowledge of the schedule that is in place for them reassures them that their world is not spinning totally out of control.

3. Prepare a checklist of all of the "essentials" the child will need as he/she shuttles between the different households. Place it in his/her backpack. Establish the habit (or, with older children, encourage the habit) of using the checklist to ensure that the child has all of the required items before leaving for the "other" house.

Tip: Laminate the checklist or place it in a protective plastic sheet. Keep a backup copy of this checklist on file.

Tip: To eliminate last minute confusion and chaos, encourage the kids to gather all of these essentials together the night before they make the transition.

4. Living out of a suitcase soon becomes an ordeal for anyone. If possible, have sufficient clothes on hand at either house so the kids don't need to drag their clothing for their stay with them.

Tip: For any clothing or equipment that needs to go back and forth, we suggest that it be cleaned by the household the child is leaving, so he/she doesn't arrive with a suitcase of dirty laundry and/or sporting equipment.

5. Even if you know that you will miss the kids terribly, wish them a good stay at the home of their other parent, and reassure them you will be OK in their absence. Don't create the impression you will be in distress, or overwhelmed with loneliness while they are gone. Doing so is likely to make the kids feel terribly stressed and worried the whole time they are away.

6. Keep in mind that the custodial parent generally has the final say over the children's schedule while those children are in their care. Accordingly:

- a) Don't make scheduling changes that would impact the other household without first securing their agreement and support.
- b) Don't expect the other parent to follow through with sanctions you have imposed on a child while that child was in your care, and
- c) Don't expect the other household to do things the way you feel they should be done--***even if these are things that you feel very strongly about.***

7. Make it abundantly clear to your kids that you expect them to follow the rules of your house when they are with you; and the rules of their other parent's house when they are staying there.

Tip: Your kids will hear this proclamation as a powerful message of love.

8. Be on time, ***every time***, when you are to pick up or deliver the kids. If you cannot be there at the designated time, ensure that one of your "back-ups" is.

Tip: Grandparents and other family members are often excellent and very available resources. Don't expect the other house to be your last minute back up.

Tip: If you depart from being consistently punctual, the other household is very likely to begin doing the same; and you will have no basis for calling them to account over it.

9. If face-to-face contact occurs with the other parent when you are delivering the kids, keep the discussion calm and pleasant. Avoid "dealing with issues" at this time. (See point 18 below.) If it doesn't seem possible to avoid conflict at these times, try waiting in your car, or at the curb, until you see the kids enter the house safely. If necessary, use a neutral pick-up and drop-off location.

10. Allow for some "adjustment" time when the child arrives at your house. Ask the child what kinds of activities would help them to settle into being in the "new" house. Some kids might want a bit of quiet time. Others may want to connect with the household they have just left by placing a telephone call. Some might want a snack and/or to be updated on the agenda that is in place for their stay.

Tip: Keep in mind that **your** moods are also likely to fluctuate with the visitation schedule, and become much more difficult in anticipation of the kids' arrival and departure.

11. If a separate room is not available for each child, provide each with a private place where they can leave belongings in your home. Ensure that, in the child's absence, no one is allowed to access this space and/or disturb the things the child has placed there.

12. All children (both full- and part-time) need to participate in family meetings, and be involved in helping with chores and the upkeep of the house in order to develop a sense of belonging in your family.

Tip: Part-time kids won't want to be at your house if they don't feel they belong; and the full-time children staying in your home will resent their special (visitor) status. Use the step-by-step guide for family meetings (available for download at www.stepfamily.ca) to begin holding family meetings that really work.

13. If possible, try to keep meal times similar at the two households. Consider the following:

- Children who are hungry are going to be grouchy and difficult to manage.
- Don't try to "deal with issues" when the kids (or other family members) are hungry, or when they are dining. You don't want the kids to associate dining with having to address difficult issues.
- Kids who have been allowed to dine in front of the television, or away from the rest of their family for years, may require an additional strategy regarding mealtime. With situations such as this, we suggest that for a

- period of time, you allow the child to dine on his/her own once or twice a week—but require them to join in at the table for other meals.
- The adults should sit at opposite ends of the table, in the positions of authority. This provides a subtle, but important message to the children that the adults are in charge. Remember: When children are in charge, chaos prevails.

Tip: Transfers that occur after the children have dined are likely to be much less hectic and difficult than those where a meal must be prepared shortly after the kids arrive. Part-time kids won't

14. Strive to keep the child's bedtime and sleep routine similar between the two houses. The essential rules of good sleep hygiene are as follow:

- The intensity of the child's activities should "wind down" as his/her bedtime approaches. Intense and/or scary games should be avoided for **at least** one hour before the child's bedtime.
- The child should have a warm bath or shower **every** night as part of his/her bedtime ritual--even on hot nights. [Reason: The fall of their body temperature that occurs when they exit the shower or bath induces deep-stage sleep. Deep-stage sleep is important for many things, including renewing their moods.]
- Designate 10 or 15 minutes for reading when the child is in bed. With younger children, read to them. For older children, encourage them to read a "boring" book.
- Keep a pencil and paper on the child's bedside table so they can write down any items they "mustn't forget". Once written, those items will be amongst the first things the child will see in the morning; so they won't need to worry about them while they are trying to fall asleep. Remember: Worry is the "thief of sleep".
- **Even if you don't subscribe to a religious position and/or prayer**, find a way to encourage the child to turn his/her worries over to a "greater power" while they sleep, so they can be relieved of feeling responsible for the well-being of the people they care about.
- Finally, for additional information and resources to address persistent sleep difficulties, follow the links at the Stepfamily Foundation of Alberta web site (www.stepfamily.ca) to the Restful Sleep program.

15. Appreciate that sorting out the name your partner's children will call you **is** a very big deal. Don't expect them to call you "mom" or "dad". Requiring them to do so is tantamount to requiring them to be disloyal to their biological parent. Your best strategy is to take their lead, and find out what labels they are comfortable using to address you.

16. Recognize that the children are going to need to figure out what to call the new "residential unit". Be open to options such as: family, stepfamily, my new

family, the Smith-Jones family, my dad's house, etc. To remove the awkwardness, you might say to the kids, "Just so others don't get confused, let's decide on a name for the family that we have when you are here. What's a name that would work well for you?"

17. Connect with your kids on a regular (and ideally a daily) basis by telephone, videoconference or email when they are staying with their other parent. Make/receive these calls within the window of time explicitly designated for such contact. If no such window of time has been designated, restrict the calls to a reasonable time (e.g., not during the supper hour or right before the child's bedtime). Encourage the other parent to do the same when the kids are staying with you.

Tip: Keep in mind that it will be difficult for your child to take your calls if the other household is displeased with the time(s) you make your calls, or how frequently you call.

18. Do not communicate with the "other" parent through the children, or "pump" the kids for information about the other parent. Doing so puts the kids in a terrible loyalty conflict. Strive to communicate directly with the other parent if possible; or by way of telephone, voice mail, email, fax, or a neutral third party if direct communication isn't possible. Keep the communication focused on the needs of the kids.

Tip: Many people start a new email account and use it exclusively for communicating about the children. Doing so provides a written and dated record of the correspondence. Another option is the **Co-parenting Journal** (available for download at www.stepfamily.ca)

19. Contact your child's school. Ask them to send notices and reports to both households. Provide the school with the child's schedule, a list of people who are permitted to pick up the children, contact information for all of their caregivers, and any pertinent medical information.

Tip: Anyone needing to pick up a child at the school should know: the child's grade and his/her teacher's name, the time the child will be discharged, the door the child will use, any relevant bus information (number, route, etc), the route that the child travels if/when they walk or ride their bike, the names of any friends they may be with, and any locations where they might stop on their way home.

Tip: If parents from the two households are unable to conduct themselves civilly when in one another's presence, ask the school to schedule separate meetings rather than calling meetings where all of the adults would be in attendance at the same time.

20. If conflict erupts between a visiting and a full-time child, send them off together to develop their own solution to the problem. Tell them: "When you have figured out a solution that works for you both, come and explain it to me; and convince me that it will work. If you can't find a workable solution that you can both agree to, you'll have to live with mine--and I'm almost certain neither of you will like my solution to this problem".

21. Allow for some adjustment time as the child is about to leave your house. Keep in mind that if you schedule things for the kids when they first arrive or as they are about to leave (without consulting them about their preferences), the activities you put in place are not likely to be well received.

Tip: Remember, **your moods** are not likely to be their best at these times either.

Additional Points to Consider:

In general, children between the ages of 9 to 15 years are likely to show the greatest difficulty adjusting to the new household. Younger children tend to be more flexible and seem able to accept most things without too much difficulty. In contrast, when kids approach 16 years of age, they usually begin disengaging with the family to invest more into their relationships with their peers--a process that is important for their normal development. Accordingly, with kids who are 16 or older, it is wise to keep your expectations regarding their investment and participation in the family well in check. Otherwise you are likely to be disappointed. For additional information on the needs and issues that children at varying age levels are likely to present see *Understanding a Child's Realities* or *Mediating Agreement on Parenting Issues*. [Both are available for free download from the Stepfamily Foundation of Alberta web site, <http://www.stepfamily.ca>]

Some children, and notably those with learning difficulties who have become accustomed to a regular, well-structured, after-school routine, may literally be unable to adapt to the routines of the "new" household, and begin to display declining achievement, moods and/or behaviour. For these children, it may be necessary to introduce their original schedule in the "new" house for a period of time. After they "settle in", they are much more likely to be able to manage with any changes that must be made--especially if these changes are introduced gradually.

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