

**See You on the Weekend.** What it's like to parent when you don't live with your children full-time

By John Hoffman

Originally published in Today's Parent, May 1997

"When we split up it was pretty devastating. I felt like I was on the edge for about four months. I had this overwhelming urge to just jump in my truck and leave. So I focused on the kids. I kept saying to myself, 'You're gonna stay by your kids, you're not going to leave your kids.' In the end I think it was the focus on my kids that pulled me through."

Colin Begg, a father of two who lives near Grand Forks, B.C., separated from his wife seven years ago, and for him, like most people, it was a traumatic event. Those of us who have never been there can only imagine the pain, the anger, the upheaval and, for the parent who doesn't get custody, the painful adjustment to no longer living (full-time) with your children.

And, in the midst of all that, you're still a parent. You still love your kids and, when they're with you, they still need to be parented. They still need to be hugged, to have their noses wiped, to be played with and read bedtime stories, all of this while they (and you) are trying to understand why they don't live with you anymore.

Mark Spearin, of Kanata, Ontario, is going through that adjustment period now. After separating from his wife, Spearin is slowly coming to terms with his new way of living, and his new schedule of relating to his two boys (ten and 12) – every Wednesday evening and every second weekend. His sons are trying to adjust as well. "I was walking John back from school one day [Spearin now lives in a townhouse across the street from his sons' school] and he said, 'Daddy, how long has it been since I've seen you?' The feeling seemed to be – 'It's been too long,' Another time Andrew asked, 'Why can't I see you more?' I told him that it was the judge's decision and that I was trying to get it changed; that I wanted to be with him more. [Spearin is hoping to get joint custody in the near future.] Of course it's more complicated than that, but I didn't want the kids to get drawn into the 'fight' I was having with my ex-wife. That's adult stuff."

Setting aside for a moment (if such a thing is possible) problems like custody disputes, support payments and acrimony between ex-spouses, the question remains, How do you continue to parent? How do you remain a positive force in your children's lives?

Divorced parents say it starts with maintaining a connection, and that isn't always easy. Joan McBurney of Ottawa has lived apart from her three boys (11, 12 and 15) for six years, and she laments missing the everyday events that help parents to feel grounded in their children's lives. "By the time I hear about them, it's old hat to the kids, and telling me these everyday things that I want so much to hear about doesn't seem to count for much to them. It really used to get me down," admits McBurney, who sees her boys every other weekend but phones every second day or so to help keep up that connection. "Sometimes they'll say, 'I can't talk now, I'm busy.'" And I ask, 'Oh yeah, what are you doing' 'Playing video games,' they'll say." Any parent of a Nintendo addict

will know that this is fairly typical behaviour, but for a non-custodial parent striving to maintain a link with her kids it might feel like a stab in the heart. “Oh yes, I’ve had to learn to roll with the punches and not take it personally,” McBurney says.

Ray Kmetiuk, of Red Deer, Alberta, had geography to contend with when he separated from his first wife 14 years ago. “She moved back to Medicine Hat to be near her family, and I was only able to see Lucas [then 18 months old] about one weekend in four.” So, once a month, Kmetiuk would make the three-hour trek to Medicine Hat and get a hotel room so he could visit his son. Along with issues such as commuting time and expenses, Kmetiuk also had to figure out how to have some “quality” time with his toddler in a hotel room. “That was a pretty unnatural environment. It was hard to set up the kind of interaction that I wanted in a hotel room.”

When Wayne Archer and his wife Wendy split up, he was unaware that she was pregnant with their second child. He had to get to know his daughter Desiree without *ever* having lived with her. Archer was there for the birth (which was premature) and he was at the hospital daily during Desiree’s extended stay, but with such a young baby, visiting was not as straightforward as it is with a six-year-old.

Archer recalls one particularly rough period after he had to be away for a month. When the regular visits resumed, it was tough. Desiree was still under one year old. “Desiree made strange with me; she’d cry and cry and I had to spend a lot of time calming her down,” he remembers. “Sometimes Josh [Archer’s son who was eight at the time] would say, ‘Let me take over, Dad.’ And he’d hold her or give her a bottle. It was pretty bad there for a while but eventually it got better, because I saw her regularly after that.”

## Staying Connected When You Can’t Be There

**Phone often.** Some parents say they need to do this every day. Depending on your child’s age and personality, the conversation may be long or short. The subject matter doesn’t have to be earth-shattering; the important thing is the contact.

**Send letters.** Kids love to get mail from grandparents, so why not an absent parent? Again, it need not be a long outpouring of emotion. You could try telling a joke, or sending your child a newspaper comic you think he’d like.

If geography and the terms of access allow, **attend special events religiously.** Your official “visits” may be restricted but you may still be able to attend hockey games, ballet recitals and school concerts. This gives you more opportunities to see your child and also shows that you have an interest in the things that are important to her.

**Relocate strategically.** If possible, find a place to live near your child’s house. This will minimize the stress of “commuting” and reduce the possibility that outside influences like weather and time constraints will interfere with scheduled time together.

**Post a calendar** displaying the dates that you will be together. This shows your child that he is part of your daily life and that you look forward to those days. It also gives him something to help him understand “the schedule,” which may be quite complicated.

or is it going to be quasi-normal? Do rules apply or are they abandoned in the quest for a nice, happy time together? Mark Spearin recalls his lawyer saying, “The ‘recreational’ parent can take it a little easier with discipline,” but he disagrees. “It might be nice to let standards slip a little, but I’ve been a parent for ten years, I can’t stop acting like one,” says Spearin. He believes that it’s very important to keep daily routines, chores discipline and other aspects of “normal” parenting a part of his time with his kids.

This is not easy. As Ray Kmetiuk notes, “When you only have one weekend a month like I do, you want quality time. You don’t want him to remember that ‘Daddy scolded me about this or Daddy was always haranguing me.’”

The sad irony is that, in some cases, discipline hassles may be *more* likely in this situation – especially with a young child who has difficulty with transitions or who is dealing with conflicting and confused feelings about both of her parents. As author Carolyn Pogue recalls in her book *The Weekend Parent*: “It didn’t register with me at first what was happening when my eight-year-old picked a fight with her brother shortly before it was time for them to leave me. Nor did I understand when good manners and behaviour deteriorated as the time grew near for another visit to end.” She wondered if that was her children’s way of defending themselves against the situation, since “It’s easier to leave when you’re angry.”

Another possibility is that children will play their affection for one parent against the other. Colin Begg recalls the antics of his 11-year-old daughter, Christie. “There have been a couple of times when we’ve had a big fight and she’d end up saying ‘I love Mom way, way, way, way, waaayy more than you.’” Even though Begg can laugh about it now it must have been threatening at times and it must take an extra dose of parental courage and fortitude not to wilt in the face of such an outburst. How did he handle it? “I’d say, ‘That’s OK. I love *you*...and you *still* have to do this.’”

Although the challenges faced by a non-custodial parent are numerous, the arrangement can work fairly well for some. Begg, whose kids are with him every weekend, observes, “I have to say that my relationship with the kids is probably better than it would have been if I’d stayed married. When you’re on your own, you’re forced to interact. But when I had my wife around – who is a very strong parent – it was easy for me to go off and do something else not necessarily with the kids.”

Archer, whose relatively mobile profession (construction) recently allowed him (along with his new wife and child) to move closer to Joshua and Desiree, is thankful for the co-operative relationship he has with his ex. “She always calls me if there’s any problem with the kids and I’ll come down if I need to.” Archer does have semi-regular scheduled visits but he also attends all of Josh’s hockey games and usually joins his children for events like birthdays or Halloween.

Not everyone who’s divorced has a relationship like that and non-custodial parents will have to play the hand they were dealt. So what can you do? Parents say two things: Make the best of your situation and put the kids first as much as possible. “Pick up the

pieces and enjoy what you've got," says Kmetiuk. "The bottom line is that all of this you're trying to do is to maintain a lasting, loving relationship with your child."

## **Resources**

*Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Shared Custody Work*, by Isolina Ricci, Macmillan, 1980. Seventeen years after its first printing, this how-to book is still recommended by many divorced parents.

*The Weekend Parent: Learning to Live without Full-time Kids*, by Carolyn Pogue, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990 (currently out of print, but should be available in libraries). This thought-provoking book centres on the process of adjustment and grieving for the non-custodial parent, using the real-life stories of divorced moms and dads.