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Supporting Your Children in Maintaining Contact with the Other Parent

Many resident parents find it challenging how to respond to their children when they do not wish to have contact with the contact parent. While some people's views on the subject might be coloured by their attitude to the other parent, many resident parents are genuinely not sure what is best for the children in this situation and how much 'pressure' to put on the children to see the other parent.

The evidence is clear that best long-term outcomes in most cases are more likely when children maintain a meaningful relationship with both parents while growing up.

1. Understanding children's concerns

- *Acknowledge their feelings:* Begin by listening to your child's concerns without judgment or immediate solutions. For example, you might say:

"I can see this is really hard for you, and I understand you feel uncomfortable."

- *Validate their experiences:* Let them know that their feelings are normal and okay, even if it's tough to understand them fully, and that they are not in trouble.

"You can tell me anything, and I will listen. I want to know why you're feeling of not seeing your Dad(Mum) and we will work on it."

2. Emphasising the importance of the relationship with the contact parent

- *Explain the role of both parents:* Help your children see that both parents care about them and have roles in their lives. A gentle way to explain might be:

"Having a relationship with both of us can help you feel balanced. Each of us loves you and wants to support you." Many grown-ups who had cut contact with a parent when they were children share that they regret doing that.

- *Frame contact in positive terms:* Describe the relationship with the other parent as valuable. For example:

"Even though things didn't work out between your Dad(Mum) and me, they're still your parent and love you very much. Having both of us in your life can make you stronger."

- *Keep Explanations Age-Appropriate:* Younger children may need simple explanations, while older children may appreciate more context. Adapt your approach based on their understanding.

3. Making arrangements for comfortable contact

- *Create a familiar routine:* Establish consistent contact routines so your children know what to expect. Routines can create security and ease anxiety. Again, quality is more important than quantity and a couple of hours quality time with the contact parent are much better than half-engaged weekend with an ambivalent child.
- *Agree for contact at familiar places:* If possible, arrange initial meetings in comfortable, neutral locations rather than new or formal settings. Familiar environments can reduce stress.
- *Use gradual steps:* Start with short visits or supervised contact if they feel apprehensive. Gradually build up to longer visits as they feel more secure. Remember, take one step at a time; this process is also needed to build trust between the parents too, not only reassuring the ambivalent child.

4. Building positive perceptions around contact

- *Avoid negative remarks:* Refrain from criticizing the other parent in front of your children. Children can feel torn if they sense negative opinions from one parent about the other. Try to keep your statements neutral, or say:

“It’s okay to love both of us, and it’s okay to feel differently about each of us.”

- *Encourage positive memories:* Remind your children of positive memories or good qualities about the other parent. Share past happy memories they had together, which can ease anxiety. Spend time looking at old photos.

“Do you remember when you went to the park together? You always had so much fun there.”

- *Highlight the benefits of both relationships:* Help them see the positive traits they get from both parents, reinforcing that they can benefit from contact with each.

5. Offering emotional support and guidance

- *Teach coping strategies:* Help children manage the anxiety or stress they may feel before visits. For instance, you could teach deep breathing exercises or encourage them to bring along a comfort item, like a favourite toy or book.
- *Encourage them to share their feelings post-visit:* Let your children know they can talk to you after the visit. You might say:

“I’m here if you want to tell me about how the time went or how you’re feeling afterward.

It’s okay to have mixed emotions.”

- *Set realistic expectations:* Gently prepare them for visits without over-promising. This can avoid disappointment and build realistic expectations around the time with the other parent.

6. Providing reassurance and stability

- *Reassure them of your presence and support:* Remind your children that your relationship with them remains steady and they can count on you. Try saying:

“No matter what, I’m here for you, and I support you. You are loved, and we’re in this together.”

- *Help them feel empowered:* Let them know it’s okay to express boundaries. If they’re nervous, give them a phrase they can use with the other parent to express their feelings, such as:

“I need a little time right now” or “I’d like to talk about something else.”

- *Discuss what contact will look like:* If appropriate, sit down with the other parent to set a mutually supportive plan. For example, agree to maintain certain conversation topics or activities that your child enjoys.

7. When children resist contact

- *Consider their perspective:* Sometimes, children resist because they don't feel understood by the other parent, or there's a miscommunication. Acknowledge their views while encouraging contact:

"I understand this feels hard, but sometimes getting to know Dad(Mum) better can help make it easier."

- *Offer incentives for willingness to try:* Rather than forcing them, consider offering rewards for their effort. A small treat or reward for trying a visit can encourage them to participate willingly.

8. When contact remains difficult

- *Seek professional guidance:* If the resistance persists or intensifies, consider reaching out to a family therapist or other professional. A therapist can provide strategies tailored to your family's unique needs.
- *Practice patience:* Understand that change is gradual, and it's okay if there are setbacks. Keep supporting your child through this challenging process. Make your best to instil patience and trust in your ex-partner, too.