

# BANANAS HANDOUT

## Planning for Summer or Holiday Custody

Are you a non-custodial parent who will once again become a full-time Mom or Dad during a summer vacation or holiday season? Are you looking forward to the experience? . . . Facing it with anxiety? . . . Or more likely, feeling a little of both? We at BANANAS are here to help you as best we can. You can call us to find out about short-term child care, to see if that good Saturday night babysitter you once used is still available or just to talk about how hard it is to limber up your daily parenting skills after not using them for awhile. Many parents like you call us with these and other concerns. Here are some suggestions that we hope will be helpful:

**Begin early . . .** Not just in looking for that “perfect” child care program for your child but in sorting out your own feelings about the coming visit. Pre-arrival emotional preparation is just as important as arranging the practical aspects. It’s wonderful to see anyone we love after a separation but it can also be a stressful time. Whatever fantasies your child has built up about you and vice versa will have to be adjusted to reality.

**Communicate with the other parent.** Try to reach some kind of agreement on the details of the visit – how long it will be, who will pay for what, etc. Also, try to find out, if you don’t already know, significant “things” which have happened to your child since your last visit together.

**Talk to your child, either in person (if possible), or by telephone or letter.** Discuss with your child what was “good” or what was “bad” when you were last with each other. Or, if this is the first such visit for you, you may want to discuss expectations you each have about the visit ahead. This is a good time to clarify with your child what is and isn’t going to happen: “No, we won’t be able

to go to Yosemite again this summer, but we will take some short camping trips.” “I can’t take off work the whole time you will be here, but I will have my two-week vacation to spend with you.”

**Remember that being apart can sometimes distort reality.** A telephone call with a child (no matter the age) is not always reliable. You don’t know what’s really happening on a day-to-day basis or in the long run and it’s hard to judge at a distance. In addition, you don’t know who’s listening to the conversation (which can affect responses) or whether it’s even a good time to talk. Don’t be disappointed if your child doesn’t sound totally thrilled about the visit when you first talk. It’s only natural that a child might be reluctant to leave his/her other parent, friends and “usual” environment (room, bed, toys). Unless such visits are already a long established and accepted part of a child’s life, s/he may be worried or frightened about what is ahead. If your relationship with the other parent is unsettled, your child may be carrying that burden. Letting your child know that you have some apprehension may help the child understand his/her own mixed feelings about the upcoming visit. But, again, don’t be disappointed if your child doesn’t immediately tell you all these feelings. It takes time (and actually being with you awhile) before some children feel ready to speak freely.

**Send a current photo beforehand.** If it has been a long time since you’ve been with your child, you will want to catch him/her up on your life before the visit. Sending a current photo might be a good start, especially if there are physical changes (new beard, weight loss or gain, etc.) that make you look different. Tell your child about any important new people in your life. New faces are less threatening if they are expected. However, be sure that your child gets a clear message from you that s/he is not being replaced by your new partner, baby, stepchild, etc. You can let your



child “off the hook” by saying you hope s/he will like your new friends but that liking them is not required, and by acknowledging that it always takes time to get to know new people.

**Prepare any new friends and/or family for the arrival of your child.** Discuss with them the changes that will occur to your lives together when your child comes to visit. Your child may not be the only one who needs to be reassured that s/he is not being replaced by someone else! You may also want to seek out other parents with similar custody arrangements or full-time single parents with whom you can share concerns and ideas. While no two situations are identical, it helps to talk to someone else who’s been there.

**Call BANANAS.** The practical matters are important too. Find out what recreational or child care programs are available. Begin interviewing care givers before your child arrives. One idea is to look for another parent to exchange child care (that means you trade off caring for each other’s children – no dollars involved). Begin doing some occasional babysitting for that parent ahead of time – first, to get yourself in practice again if you haven’t been around children for awhile, and second, to cement the exchange before you really need it.

**Look around your house to see what changes you will need to make in sleeping arrangements, etc. to accommodate your child’s visit.** The child should feel like they have a sense of home. Have clothes, toys, books and even a room for your child, if possible, so that they feel like they have a part of themselves in the home. If your child has friends in your neighborhood from past visits, let them know the plans and the arrival

date.

**Have a doctor and dentist in mind for emergencies.** Create an emergency contact list as well. The more you are prepared on the practical level, the easier the transition into full-time parenting will be.

In the end, however, you can’t anticipate every problem which might occur during your child’s stay. The best any of us can do is be well prepared and then cope with situations as they arise. Once your child is actually on the scene, give yourselves time to adjust – don’t expect too much, too soon. Your child doesn’t know you in the same way as s/he knows the other parent. It is important to resist the urge to make negative comments about the other parent or to interrogate your child about the other parent’s new life. It may take a while before your child feels comfortable with you without feeling disloyal to the other parent. It isn’t possible or even desirable for you to suspend your current everyday life for an extended period of time to spend every minute with your child. Time does “march on.” Growth and change are part of that. Remember that parenting under any circumstances (full-time or part-time) brings both joys and challenges.

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