

PARENT CHILD CONTACT

(Formerly known as "Visitation")

- Parent Child Contact used to be called visitation. The wording of the law was changed to be more sensitive to the fact that children need to be parented, not "visited" by their parents.
- Children need to be able to spend as much time as possible with each of their parents. When parents separate, their children should not be denied the opportunity to spend quality time with each of their parents. If the parents had remained together, the children would have enjoyed access to each parent on a daily basis. Therefore, unless there are good reasons to limit the contact a parent has with the children, (such as abuse or the use of violence), the parenting plan should include contact with both parents on a regular basis.
- The process of ending of a relationship is sometimes emotional. Parents may be angry at one another over broken commitments and feelings of being deceived and cheated. Children who are exposed to their parents' arguments often blame themselves for the fights of their parents. Sometimes the children feel they have to pick "sides" between their parents. Parents need to be particularly sensitive to their children and keep them out of their adult conflicts. The reasons people have for ending their relationships are not reasons for children to change their relationship with their parents.
- Each parent has a responsibility to ensure that their children are encouraged to just be children and enjoy childhood with each parent. The single most important thing parents can do for their children is to resolve their conflicts and cooperate in parenting their children.
- Research shows that children adjust well to all types of parenting arrangements. Therefore it makes little difference how the parents decide to share or divide parental rights and responsibilities. What is important is to keep the children out of whatever conflict the parents have with each other.
- The one factor that seems to predict problems for children that may even extend into their adulthood is unresolved conflict. Children do not adjust well to life when their parents continue their conflicts after the relationship is ended.

Abusive Parents and Parent Child Contact

- There are occasions when one parent's behavior with a child places the child at risk. When there is a risk to a child, limitations need to be placed on the parent child contact. Such limitations may be no use of alcohol or restrictions about where the parent may take the child.
- Even when there are concerns about a child's safety, a parent will usually not be denied contact completely. The contact may be supervised by an appropriate person or structured to protect the child, such as at a Supervised Visitation Center in your community, and give the parent the opportunity to change and be more responsible as a parent. If supervised visitation is requested, the parent who requests it needs to find an appropriate person to supervise or have access to a Supervised Visitation Center, because most family courts do not have available supervisors. Denying a parent contact with his or her child is only a solution where all other options have failed.

Child Support and Parent Child Contact

- Child support and parent child contact are two separate issues. A parent who is not paying child support is still allowed contact with his or her children. In the same manner, payment of child support does not determine the amount of parent child contact.
- Children need both the financial and emotional support of their parents. It makes no sense to deny children emotional support of one parent because that parent is not being responsible for financially supporting his or her children.

New Relationships and Parent Child Contact

- It is not harmful for children to be nurtured and cared for by people other than their biological parents. When two parents have ended their interpersonal relationship, it is healthy for them to become involved in relationships with other people if it makes them happy.
- It is natural that children will become involved with their parents' new partners. Parents' involvement in new relationships can be difficult, but it does not need to be a strain on the children. How well the children adjust to the new relationships often depends on how the parents react. If mom hates dad's new girlfriend and lets the children know this, it is likely that the children will not like the new girlfriend. But if she greets this news with "great, dad will be happy", then the children will feel safe in liking the new girlfriend.
- It is important to accept that parenting responsibilities remain with the biological parents. New partners do not substitute for natural parents nor remove parents from their responsibilities to their children.

Parent Child Contact as a Replacement for Child Care

- When possible, children need to be with one of their parents when the other parent is not available. Some parents angrily refer to their time spent with their children as "babysitting". They sometimes resent the fact that the other parent is doing something else while they are spending time with the children. From a child's perspective however this situation is ideal. Each parent is sharing the responsibility of being with them and each parent has an opportunity to be away from the children and enjoy free time.

Changing Residences and Parent Child Contact

- If one parent decides to relocate, the parenting arrangement may have to be reevaluated in light of the change to insure the children still have the opportunity to spend time with both parents. Whether a long distance move of the primary custodial parent is reason to change parental rights and responsibilities depends on the circumstances of the case. If a move is contemplated by the primary parent, the move will be evaluated in light of the best interests of the children. The court may order the parent to delay the moving plans until the parenting issues have been resolved.

When one Parent is not Spending Enough Time with the Children

- The court cannot force a parent who is not spending enough time with his or her children to change. A judge ordering a parent to spend time with the children won't work. There are other reasons and problems that prevent parents from continuing their relationship with their children. Education or counseling will help more than a court order.

**You can obtain helpful information, as well as court forms at:
www.VermontJudiciary.org.**