



School Days Are Here Again 2011

This past week as the new school year was suddenly upon us I observed the mumblings of my about to be Grade 7 and Grade 8 grandchildren. You know the 'I don't want to go' to the 'I can hardly wait to see...' Parents everywhere are looking forward to a routine being reintroduced to their family's life but also are concerned about managing the often too busy schedules that often squeeze their day-to-day lives.

It is also a difficult time emotionally for newly separating or separated families. In many ways it can be like Christmas with its emotional connections, good memories and now the loneliness of a parent being absent from the excitement of those first days. It is a clarifying moment for everyone that family life has changed...forever. It can also be a time when old access schedules take a beating and conflicts sometimes occur.

It is also an expensive time with new activities beginning and schools often asking for additional fees for this or that. Many of our parents continue to face economic difficulties that are part of the current economic times. We have been reminded of that with the layoffs at RIM- layoffs that struck families from every wage category. Separated families rarely have enough income to support a dad's home and a mom's home and the current environment can lead to additional conflict and pain. It often comes down to hard choices about what your children can do this upcoming year.

I HAVE SOME ADVICE AT THE END RE: THIS ISSUE ON CHANGING WAGES.

I have compiled a list of ideas to consider for the upcoming school year.

- Both parents must together or independently establish a relationship with their child's teachers and school. If the separation is new then a school visit is an imperative. The school is going to be a main source of information re: your child's transition from an intact family.
- Plan to attend school activities. Co-operate to ensure that one or both of you are available for every activity. Include supervising on a school trip as a volunteer. Establish a pattern to share your children's activities. If the 'together' thing is too difficult then work out parallel arrangement that works.
- **MEET THE TEACHER NIGHT IS COMING UP!** Ensure that you attend the 'meet the teacher' and all other parents' nights, especially report card meetings. Do not count on the other parent to be the conveyor of information. If need be give the school postage prepaid envelopes with your mailing address for your child's Report Card, newsletters, etc. Schools are RARELY pro-active in ensuring

- that BOTH PARENTS receive all info. I know many separated parents who have never seen their child's report card with all the valuable info on your child.
- **If the schoolteacher is hesitant to provide duplicate material, be insistent and follow through.** Every parent needs to be in a position to help their child with their homework. Be aware of your child's curriculum.
 - Make sure that you are up-to-date on your child's school friends.
 - Attend extracurricular activities that are outside the school- e.g. dance, hockey, and ringette. RESPECT the other parent on those nights that are their access nights. Do not make participation by both parents a problem. Set a good example for your children.
 - Plan out a co-operative parenting schedule. **Respect it! Abide by it! The schedule is the LAW UNLESS BOTH PARENTS AGREE TO A CHANGE! YOU CANNOT SIMPLY DEMAND A CHANGE!**
 - If changes need to be made then consider a process to make that happen. It could be done through a mediator if you are unable to make it happen cooperatively.
 - Expenses need to be talked through and not simply a bill handed over with a demand. Dads in many cases need to know that school aged children cost money and that these expenses may be separate from the question of access. Primary care parents need to know that denying access damages your children. **The bottom line is that the more both parents are part of the decision and involved in the outcome, the more likely that you will see improved outcomes for your children.**
 - I mentioned last year my concern re: the use of Facebook, Twitter, etc. to take verbal shots at a former partner. These concerns remain an alarming and disturbing development. These verbal potshots are in reality not only an attack on your child's other parent but also upon your child. They are simply unproductive for everyone. **This is absolutely unacceptable!** It is embarrassing/hurtful to your child and is making public what is essentially a private family matter. **Another aspect** of the use of the social media is the potential misuse and risk to our children. If we as the parents are hooked on Facebook and messaging, why wouldn't we expect our children to model themselves in the same way? The problem is that most children are without the life experiences that we bring to social networking. This is particularly a problem for children in the tween age bracket. In separated families children of this age may rely on these friends even more and also have more time alone, etc. As such the good aspect of a child cell phone (safety, ready availability) may become lost to the negative side (vulnerability and obsession). Go on line, educate yourself on the risks to your adolescent and develop a protocol that works for your family.
 - If you are newly separated don't be afraid to initiate a meeting(s) as necessary with a key teacher/mentor/coach to your child. They can watch over your child and encourage participation and friendships.
 - Finally, if you have a new partner during the school year, take it slow and easy. Understand possible reactions of your child; deal with your former partner in a mature, honest and sensitive manner. Read up on the possible reactions. Ask your new partner to be patient as you try to work out the new dynamics.

I have often stated that parenting through a separation is a marathon, not a sprint. I have adapted my thinking- separation is a series of sprints that eventually add up to a marathon. Just when you think there is a comfortable pattern, life gets in the way. Life in the way can be a remarriage or a move or a job loss/ financial crisis or a child in crisis or.... Every separated family in every school year is likely going to face a difficult change(s) that may trigger a crisis. The challenge is to figure out a process to accommodate the crisis. Some should be easier than others.

Recently at Kids ‘n’ Dad the issue about changing child support payments following a job loss i.e. reduced income has become the concern. What should be a straightforward change – done through consent of the parties directly or through the Family Responsibility Office (FRO) too often becomes the bailiwick of lawyers who complicate the process. I have too often watched cases that should be done by consent become \$10,000 in legal costs. Job losses and changes in income are common enough events. They require adult settlements. Failure to accommodate obvious changes may have consequences for children when they occur- bad mouthing by parents in front of the children- reliving the separation by both parties delaying recovery- child taking sides- damaging the future prospects for a family finding their new path-etc.

My advice is that as separated parents we have an obligation to find solutions to those ‘life gets in the way’ happenings. The Law Society of Ontario came out with a 2010 report that asked users for comments on the Family Law System. The telling assessment made by users was that often-solvable problems were turned into unsolvable outcomes. For a moment think about that conclusion/indictment. The legal system often makes things worse by saddling separating families with solutions that lead to irreparable damage for countless family relationships.

As a parent, grandparent and retired teacher, the beginning of the school year has always been about renewal. In a newly separated family or otherwise best outcomes are found in finding trusted advice and support that works for you and your family. It isn’t easy but in the end it is the best option for the future. Every other option has the potential to come back at you in a few months or years. **Always remember that marathon vs. sprint thing.**

My desire is that 2011-2012 will be a cooperative school year where your children found the loving support that all children need from both of their parents and extended families.

Please know that Kids ‘n’ Dad Shared Support is here for you.

Kids ‘n’ Dad will be shortly sending out dates for upcoming educational workshops and support groups.

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