

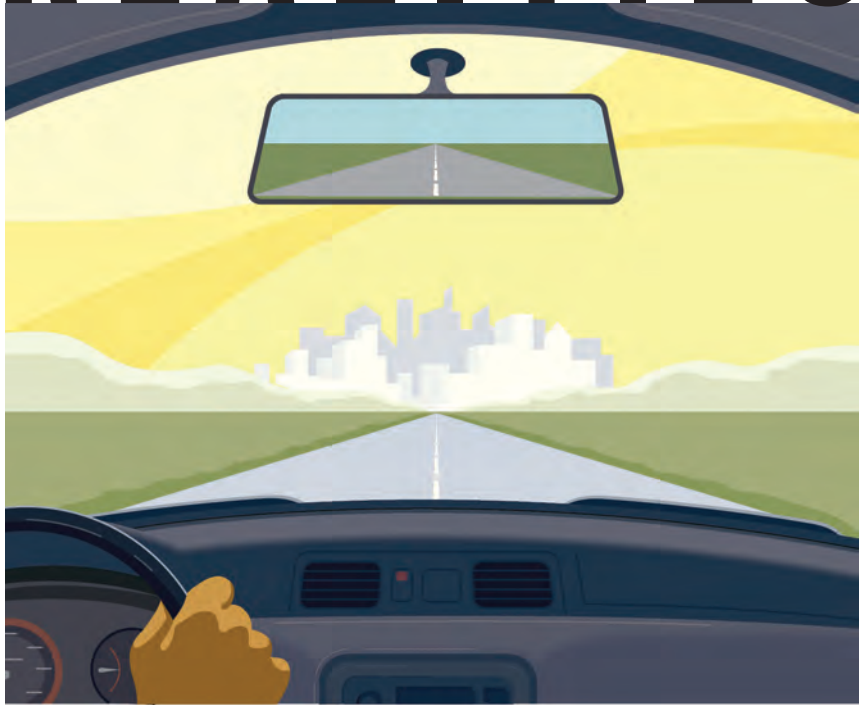
RELOCATION REALITIES

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Developing a long-distance parenting plan

BY **LESLIE ELLEN SHEAR**



Parents who are considering moving with their children after separation or divorce, and parents deciding whether to oppose the children's move have a lot to think about. Many of the same dilemmas arise when one parent moves away from the community in which the other parent lives with the children.

Coparenting well in the same community is challenge enough. Coparenting across a distance presents far greater challenges and fewer options. Family court judges and appellate courts describe moveaway cases as among the most difficult on their dockets. Although American family courts are charged with creating parenting plans in children's best interests, moveaway cases typically focus on figuring out which plan is the least detrimental alternative given the challenges of distance.

Each of the fifty states and various U.S. territories has its own set of custody statutes and its own laws. While there are

variations in moveaway law, each of those legal frameworks provides a structure for considering the same practical consequences of a move. The same considerations that go into parental decision-making will usually be important to a child custody evaluator and to a judge if the relocation request goes to trial.

Legal custody information exchange

Your legal custody plan governs how you will share information, what information must be shared, and what decision-making authority each of you will have. When both parents

Pondering Your Plan

- 1 Information exchange**—How will you share information about the children, and what kind of information will need to be shared?
- 2 Decision-making authority**—How will you allocate authority to make parenting decisions?
- 3 Parenting schedule**—How much time will the children spend in the care of each parent?
- 4 Travel arrangements**—What are all the logistics for travel between the two communities by parents and children?
- 5 Parenting from afar**—How will the distant parent remain part of the children's day-to-day lives?
- 6 How will holidays, vacations, special days, and relationships with extended family be handled?**
- 7 Support services**—What counseling, coparent education, coparenting websites, etc., are available?
- 8 How and when** will the paternity plan be renewed and updated?

—L.E.S.

are involved in the children's daily care, each typically gets much of the important information about the children's lives directly from observation and through direct contact with schools and care providers. It takes more effort to keep both parents in the loop in a long-distance parenting plan.

Start your collaborative information exchange before the move with each parent researching and sharing information about schools, child care, medical care, day camps, and activities. The earlier in the information-gathering process that you invite the other parent's participation, the better. For example, rather than saying, "I'm planning to send the children to Red Rooster School, do you agree?" begin with, "I've found three schools in Newtown that we might look at. Here's the contact information for each. Are there any other schools you think we should consider? I'll let you know what I find out—please do the same for me."

Look for schools and care providers who are willing to keep an absent parent well informed through regular phone and e-mail contact. Look at the school's website—many share homework information, calendars, and event information directly with parents online or by e-mail. Some teachers will accept a stack of stamped envelopes addressed to the absent parent and send a weekly packet of copies of items that went home with the child—but others have little time for such assistance.

Look for doctors who will have the trust of both parents, involve the absent parent in medical appointments via speakerphone, and who both parents will trust to advise

them as to whether a child is too ill to travel. Make sure the child has a doctor in each town, and that each faxes or e-mails all changes to the child's chart to the doctor in the other community.

Some coparents stay in touch daily by phone, text, or e-mail, whereas others have much less frequent contact. Try to find the pattern that is comfortable for both parents. Internet services, such as www.ourfamilywizard.com, offer structured ways to exchange e-mails, forward documents, and maintain a family calendar. (See also Rosen, page 2.)

Keep a mommy or daddy "in-box" easily accessible when children are emptying their backpacks after school. Get the children involved in choosing notices, samples of schoolwork, report cards, invitations, calendars, drawings, and other items for faxing or scanning to the other parent daily, or at least a few times a week. Items in the "in-box" also can prompt memory of things to talk about by phone or videoconferencing with the other parent. Send lots of pictures that show children, activities, and the important people and places in the child's life.

Whatever communication methods you use, ex-etiquette is important. Use friendly language, share lots of concrete information, and involve the other parent in all stages of decision making—rather than just asking the other parent to ratify a decision you have already made. Don't express uninvited opinions about the other parent or that parent's actions, ideas, or the people in that parent's life. Keep the topic on coparenting issues, and occasional small talk. Make regular deposits into the bank of goodwill by showing appreciation for what the other parent does as a parent or coparent, and invoking shared pride and positive memories. The more goodwill you build up, the easier it will be to resolve conflicts and complaints when they arise.

Don't expect that coparenting will be conflict-free. Conflict is normal—no two people will always agree. Sooner or later your long-distance parenting will hit a bump in the road. Research tells us that it is *unresolved* conflict that harms children. Approach the other parent with a complaint from a problem-solving perspective, rather than one of blame. Explain the practical problem, ask the other parent for his or her perspective, brainstorm alternatives, and then work toward a shared solution.

An exchange of information is important for each parent's connectedness to the child and ability to know what is going on and be able to discuss experiences with the child. It is also critical for joint decision-making. In addition to a plan for what information you will share, and how you will share it, develop a clear plan for what decisions each parent may make alone (for example, signing a consent for a school field trip), which decisions will always be reserved to a particular parent (perhaps one parent will choose school enrichment activities, while the other will choose summer programs), and which decisions will require the consent of both parents (possibly, a change of schools or physicians).

● Parenting schedules

Work and school schedules, travel time and expenses, and children's ages all factor into the parenting schedule. Before developing a schedule, you'll need some concrete information.

It is difficult to establish a meaningful long-distance parenting plan for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. To develop and sustain a comfortable, familiar, "reciprocally connected" parent-child relationship, young children need to spend time in the care of each parent every few days, and need to experience that parent's involvement in all aspects of care—from soothing to playing, and from eating to bathing. Although some parents have successfully traveled to spend part of each week with a young child, most do not have the time and money to do so. Experts urge parents to delay moves until the child reaches at least age three or four.

If the parent-child relationship doesn't get off to a strong start during the child's first few years, the child and parent

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will not suddenly be ready to spend long stretches with one another. Neither knows what to expect from the other, and the absent parent is not a source of emotional security for the child. Consequently, their time together can be upsetting and disappointing. At all ages and stages, the level of familiarity and comfort that the parent and child have with one another is a critical element in determining the schedule. A plan for sustaining a strong relationship is very different from a plan for developing a relationship.

Where the child and parent have an established bond, frequent videoconferencing can help the child maintain a sense of continuity with the absent parent. This requires both the parent who is with the child and the distant parent to become skilled at engaging the child, and interacting in ways that the child finds enjoyable. In addition, the child should have access to photo albums of the child and the absent parent. Watching videos of the absent parent playing with the child, singing songs, and telling stories should be part of the child's daily routine.

Once children start school, their schedule typically is tied to the school calendar. Every month has either a three-day weekend or a holiday. During the school year, it is best if the distant parent can spend a few days each month (one school day tacked on to a long weekend) in the child's community. That way the parent can meet teachers, attend checkups, and get to know the child's friends, parents of friends, activ-

Holidays, Vacations, & Special Days

Holidays, vacations, and special days are important because they build traditions, connectedness with cultures and heritage, and are occasions we enjoy with extended families. Alternating holidays dilutes much of that experience—the children don't experience the repeated rituals of preparing for the holiday, setting up the same decorations, preparing and eating the same foods, enjoying the same activities, and celebrating with the same people that give these events deeper meaning. Consider choosing some holidays that the children will celebrate with the same parent every year, rather than alternating holidays.

— L. E. S.

ity leaders, and the places where the child spends time. Most communities have condo-style residence hotels, timeshare condominiums, or short-term rental apartments in which the parent can maintain family life, including cooking meals, doing homework, and having children spend the night. Some parents make arrangements to store personal property between trips.

Children then spend most of the long school vacations and a significant part of the summer in the home of the nonschool-year parent. Many parenting plans include some vacation time with the school-year parent, and a week to settle in before school starts. The younger the child, the more important it is for the school-year parent to come to the summer-parent's community for several three-day stretches so that separations from the school-year parent are not longer than a young child can tolerate. Some families schedule the school-year parent's summer vacation stays—spacing them in midsummer.

If the children need summer school, find out if they qualify to attend in the "summer parent's" school district. If the nonschool-year parent has become a familiar face to a child's friends' parents, those parents may accept invitations for their child to visit in the other town.

As kids get older, they may have enrichment activities, such as sleep-away camps, that are important to them, reducing time available to spend with parents. Teenagers may or may not want to spend the summer in a different community and may have plans with friends or for programs reflecting their interests. Teenagers typically expect to participate in decision making about their own schedules.

Friendships and enrichment activities are important to children once they reach school age. It takes more work to help children sustain their connections with friends in the other community, but instant messaging, social networking

sites, e-mail, videoconferencing, telephones, and texting all help. It also takes work to find day camps, and other activities that will be a good fit.

● Making it work

The same tools (phones, smartphones, and computers) that help parents stay in touch for coparenting, and children remain connected to friends in other communities can be used to bridge the distance between children and parents if both parents genuinely support these contacts and are flexible in making these arrangements. Do not expect that any child will always be home and in the mood for a phone call or videoconference. Some families are comfortable doing this spontaneously, whereas others need a schedule. If you are using a schedule, make sure that it integrates into the child's routine and expect to complete perhaps 70 percent of scheduled virtual visits.

Planning and paying for travel by children and parents is one of the thorniest aspects of long-distance parenting. Figure out which airports and airlines serve each community and use airline-linked credit cards that help accrue miles to reduce travel costs. Take turns booking flights—and do so with consideration for the other parent's needs—price, location, and times all make a huge difference. Book early and forward itineraries. Come up with a formula for sharing travel expenses. These include housing, rental car, and other expenses when a parent comes to the children—not just when the children travel to see a parent.

Consider the physical realities of travel and the toll they take on parents and children. Remember that travel time includes the ride to the airport, parking, navigation through security, waiting, boarding, occasional long waits on the runway, and then claiming luggage, and the drive home. Don't make plans that will put a travel-fatigued parent behind the wheel with cranky kids, or have kids get off a plane in a different time zone and plunge into frenetic activity.

Be cautious about making plans in which younger children travel unaccompanied, even if the airline permits it. Generally children under age 10 are too young to fly alone on short direct flights (although they may manage it with a responsible older sibling), and children under age 14 may be too young for international or connecting flights. Consider

the child's own maturity, judgment, resourcefulness, and confidence. Travel can be stressful and uncertain, even for adults. Airline personnel have lots to do besides providing supervision and care to children. Flights get delayed and diverted. Children struggle to keep themselves amused in transit, and sometimes misbehave. It is difficult for children to be seated for so long. They end up with energy to burn. A receiving parent may get delayed by weather or traffic, and not be there to meet a flight. Seatmates may make inappropriate remarks. Young children get confused about where the restrooms are, or when they can be visited. They are often too shy to ask for help.

You may want to develop an ongoing relationship with a coparenting counselor or mediator to help you implement and adapt your long-distance parenting plan. Technology, such as online meeting programs or videoconferencing, allow you to have meaningful joint sessions with your coparenting counselor from a distant location, augmented by in-person sessions when both parents are in the same town.

● Successful long-distance parenting

Successful long-distance parenting takes work, patience, flexibility, money, time, genuine goodwill, and respect for the other parent. No matter how carefully you plan, unexpected events will require adapting the plans. Experience; changes in the children's ages, development, and schedules; the needs of new mates and children; parents' changing work demands; and other factors will require both parents to adapt your long-distance parenting plan. Taking the time before the move to consider the practical issues and develop shared expectations will make carrying out the plan and adapting to change much less difficult. **FA**

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