

Access and the adolescent... Issues on both sides of the fence...

Adolescence has a way of changing everything – including access. Separated parents who have long settled into an access regime now must contend with the wishes of their teenager when determining visits and even with whom they live.

Two key issues come to mind when considering these changes. The first is the changing demands of school, social and working life of the teen. The second is when the sins of the parent come back to haunt them.

When the teenager's life gets busy, access is viewed as an inconvenience. As such many access parents are confronted with voice messages saying their teen isn't coming over this weekend. This of course is met with dismay and if there was ever any concern about the custodial parent undermining access, this scenario is certainly a set-up for conflict.

Access parents whose teenagers challenge the terms of access need to talk with them to restructure visitation with particular concern for the teen's experience. This is certainly a new stage of life and any parent who thinks they can control their teen's needs, will be sadly mistaken. This is not to say the tail now wags the dog, but rather, the access parent must appreciate the needs of their teen and in the interest of a good relationship, they must show flexibility.

Access parents may now find themselves having more impromptu dinners and meetings with their teenaged kids – and getting on their “chat” list in order to keep in touch. Those parents who accommodate to their children's developmental changes tend to maintain better relationships than those who do not. A better relationship also means a better chance of being able to still provide input, direction and guidance and most importantly, maintain a life-long relationship. It's still OK to push for sleepovers, but now with a sense of your teen's needs.

As for the sins of the past, adolescence is also a time when teens put two and two together on their own. If the teen discovers they've been lied to about the access parent as a ploy to undermine that relationship, they will feel resentful. This is when the custodial parent learns that teens “vote with their feet”. Their resentment can cause them to change residence in favour of the access parent. Again, depending on the relationship between access and custodial parent, this too can be a recipe for increased conflict with all involved.

What are parents to do when they feel the tug of changes that adolescence may bring?

1. Recognize that kids do grow up and as such have ever increasing needs of their own. Adolescence is a time of establishing an independent identity, so parents must help manage the changes through discussion and negotiation. Put a rock in the middle of the river and the water will find it's own new course. Negotiate the changes and then you can influence the direction of change.
2. If you don't want the sins of the past to haunt you... then don't sin! If you have undermined your child's relationship to the access parent out of spite or anger, then lying or covering up will only add to your problems – much like you tell your children. If you have misrepresented the past and your teen has come to understand this, then it may be time for counseling - on your own and with your teen. To maintain this relationship, you must now work to repair it, otherwise there is risk you can undermine your current and life-long relationship.

Changes in access and even residence are not necessarily bad things. In fact it could just represent a natural and positive developmental process on the part of your teenager. Although the changes may be experienced as a loss to one or other parent, in fact it is likely a signal that your child is growing up. It is important to remember, that even in intact two-parent families, these natural changes do occur. As much as your child is preparing for adulthood, parents must prepare for their eventual separation and leaving home. Manage the process well and you can not only avoid serious conflict between all parties, but you can set yourselves up well for the next stage of life – an adult to adult relationship with your kids.

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