

Parenting in Absentia

By A Displaced Homemaker

You often hear the phrase, “Welcome to the teenage years!” Friends follow with, “They are all like that.” What some fail to realize, however, is that the relationship between children and a non-custodial parent suffers a greater disconnect than that of the parent of primary residence (PPR) due, in part, to logistics and communication.

The PPR benefits from the almost daily ability to simply observe. Take the comments from the first paragraph; these are expressed by parents who see their children on a daily basis. Sure communication in general is diminished by the sheer fact that our children are teens, but there is a lot to be said for the observation of them in their normal routines. Who are their friends? What are they watching on television? What is their personal wardrobe style? Are they eating and resting properly? The Parent of Alternate Residence (PAR) only gets a snippet of this behavior since there is usually an adjustment period at the onset of each alternate’s parenting visit. The children settle in, text their friends that they’re not at “home”, and figure out what clothes and possessions are available for their comfort, and what they need that they don’t have to complete their projects and homework. A fair amount of the PAR’s time with their children is spent commuting. While some can make meaningful connection with their captive audience during this time, it is frequently compromised by rush hour traffic and racing thoughts of the day’s work and school activities.

Unfortunately, marriages that end in divorce often exhibited a lack of communication on some level prior to their demise. It would be advantageous for the children if parents can set aside their differences and find common ground when co-parenting their children. Instead of one parent being at Point A and the other parent being at Point Z, maybe they can meet mid-alphabet. Even if that is the case, parents may have very different definitions of “important” or “newsworthy.” In the educational environment, communication is often directed to the contact first listed on the student’s emergency card. You guessed it, the PPR! Kudos to those teachers who go the extra mile and actively keep both parents in the loop. Routine, preventative medical care that wasn’t given a second thought now needs to be discussed and, hopefully, agreed upon. New financial obligations, dreams and varying personal opinions may influence even the most fundamental decisions in surprising ways.

The PPR often receives the children’s social invitations because they are the familiar face whether at school, church or in the neighborhood. Children may spend time almost equally between both parent’s residences but because of society’s perception, the primary is viewed as “custodial.”

The Parents of Alternate Residence can be easily lost beneath a mountain of paperwork and poor communication, while quickly losing grasp of their children’s identities. The void grows even greater with the introduction of a step-parent and another, not necessarily complementary or familiar, parenting approach. Greater still is the void if we delved into the emotions and behaviors of the children who view the PAR as abandoning them but those are topics for yet another essay.