

Q&A Back to School Tips for Divorced Parents

By Carlos Lastra, Tracey Coates

It's Back to School for children and families, and there are new classes, school routines and activities to manage. When parents are divorced, those things are even more challenging. There are often disputes about which school children should attend, public or private, which activities children should do, recreation or travel team, and how much one parent should pay for tuition, sports, lessons, supplies, books, computers, and clothes. Studies show divorce often has a negative effect on children's school performance. Two of Washington, DC's top family lawyers and relationship experts, Tracey J. Coates and Carlos Lastra talk about how to make Back to School easier for kids whose parents are divorced. Below are their Back to School tips for divorced parents.

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Carlos Lastra



Tracey Coates

Q: What makes Back To School challenging for children with divorced parents?

Coates: Going Back to School has a lot of uncertainty. There are many adjustments to make from new classes, teachers, and friends to new activities, schedules and routines. It's more difficult for children whose parents are divorced because their parents may still be at odds. The beginning of each school year is the perfect time for divorced parents do a complete review of the terms of their Parenting Agreement. That way parents can start the year being clear about their intentions, expectations and commitments, and whether they are complying with the terms of their Agreement. When there is more understanding, children feel better and perform better in school.

Lastra: One of the reasons that Back to School is so challenging for divorced parents is that they often have different expectations, disagreements and also resentments with their ex that spill over to their children. There may be disagreements about private versus public school, and who is going to pay for it. What schools offers a curriculum that one parent thinks is better than another. Skirmishes over school districts, sometimes to manipulate having more time with the children. Clarity is key. Even with college bound kids - what is going to be included as far as costs: tuition, room and board, books, lab fees, athletic fees, etc? Is your kid going to miss out on the big game at the Swamp this year? Canes vs. Gators – what's that going to be like for them? Where there is lack of clarity, there is the potential for problems. And when there is anger and resentment, there is conflict and family stress. For example, one parent may resent their ex for not paying enough for school tuition. Another parent may want a child to be in a different school. A complete review of the Parenting Agreement will determine compliance or enforcement issues. Remember, changes to the agreement must be documented, put in writing and be confirmed by both parents. The Parenting Agreement or Court Order has to be rock solid on the details.

Q: When school begins, there are many school and after-care schedules, games, practices, performances, recitals, parents' nights and other special events. How can divorced parents and children keep up with so many activities, especially when they may have their own new blended families?

Coates: Divorced parents need to do "Calendar Action" regularly, and by that I mean check ins with your ex on what is on the children's school calendar, activities schedule and vacation dates. Today, things are much easier with "shared calendars" and there are some excellent apps for that. Important dates or schedule changes should be put into the shared calendar. If one parent doesn't have a "shared calendar," the start of the school year is a great time to put one together and will help both parents keep track of school and extra-curricular activities.

Lastra: Every school puts out an annual school calendar which lists all important school dates. Sports teams or extracurricular activities also put out calendars which list practices, games, tournaments, performances or special events for participants and parents. Start with these and be sure to add them into the shared calendar. Then parents can use this information to address any changes that need to happen to the parenting schedule such as adjusting pick-up or drop-off times, transportation or location changes. If major changes are needed, then parents should immediately try to resolve any issues before the school year gets too far along. This makes it much easier for children to know their schedule and which parent will be involved and when.

Q: What is the best way for divorced parents to agree on activities, especially when they live in different cities or have different views on what types and what level of activities they want for their children?

Coates: Whenever parents wait too long and argue, children's stress rises and their school performance suffers. As parents, you don't want to wait until the registration forms are due to make these decisions. Many Parenting Agreements require that parents discuss and agree on their children's involvement in certain activities before the child is registered. Now is a great time for divorced parents to connect and discuss the proposed sports, clubs, religious, language, or other extracurricular activities for their children.

Lastra: Unfortunately, coaches who are running try-outs or theater or music directors overseeing auditions don't wait for divorced parents to "agree on" whether their child will be able to participate. You snooze, your Kid is going to lose. We recommend divorced parents start discussing their child's interest in a program or activity early on, during the summer, so decisions can be made well in advance of tryouts or registration. The last thing you want is a having a Judge decide what activity your child will or will not participate in because you as parents were still arguing. But if that is where you end up, you are going to want to be the parent that was acting in the best interests of the children. The higher road is the winning road.

Q: Divorced parents often have disagreements about how much one parent will pay for schools, activities, supplies, phones and computers. What is your guidance on who pays and how those expenses are reimbursed?

Coates: Children are often caught in the middle between their divorced parents, especially when their parents disagree over expenses. The more divorced parents can get commitments in writing, the better it is for predictability, planning and family harmony. Many Parenting Agreements require an exchange of child related expenses or an accounting of expenses. Parents should include as much information about expenses before the school year gets well underway. The other parent isn't responsible to contribute to every expense. Just because your sister's ex-husband reimbursed her for the sports team snacks and end of season party doesn't mean you are entitled to reimbursement for these same things.

Lastra: Remember, documentation of reimbursement requests is key. It is important to be sure to provide a copy of any receipts, invoices or other documentation when requesting a contribution or reimbursement from the other parent. Also, always make sure to document the requests in writing (or confirm the request in writing if the original communication was done over the telephone or in person) especially in case you may need to involve the Court at a later time. This is very helpful when a child engages in new or expensive activities, such as horseback riding, skiing or ice skating. You don't want to later be asked to pay for a horse too! It is very important that you follow your Parenting Agreement regarding the items that are subject to reimbursement, the timeframe for requesting contribution or reimbursement requests, and the response time for paying reimbursements. Also, the law provides that parents are required to support

their children in proportion to their incomes.

Q: What is the best way for divorced parents to handle all of the forms children must complete at the beginning of a school year?

Coates: Back to School is a great time to update necessary forms and information. Yes, it seems like a mountain of forms: medical exams (health, dental, optical), change of emergency contacts or persons authorized to pick-up, and change of address. In many cases, both parents are required to sign the forms and return them to school by a certain date. It is important not to be late in completing and returning this information.

Lastra: Divorced parents should be sure to alert the school of any Orders directly impacting the child including Protective Orders, pick up restrictions and release of information relating to the child. It is important to provide your child's school with updated information at the beginning of the year, or at any time that there is a change which directly impacts the child. Updating and keeping the school informed of any new routines, changes or orders, keeps everyone in the loop.