

# Ep #19: 10 Parenting-Exchange Strategies to Prioritize Your Child's Wellbeing After Separation



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## Ep #19: 10 Parenting-Exchange Strategies to Prioritize Your Child's Wellbeing After Separation

You're listening to *The Sensible Split* podcast, Episode 19. Today I'm talking about best practices for parenting exchanges.

*The Sensible Split* is a podcast for smart but overwhelmed women in search of a roadmap to a successful separation and divorce. If you are looking for guidance in navigating the practical, legal, and emotional aspects of divorce with confidence, this is the show for you. Here's your host, Master Certified Life and Divorce Coach, Divorce Attorney, and Mediator, Lauren Fair.

Hello there, welcome back to the podcast. I hope your week is off to a good start. This is the last week for me with my kids for their summer. We are getting ready for back-to-school time. I have gone through and organized all of the back-to-school supplies and we are all ready to go.

I don't know if you've seen some of those reels on social media making fun of how ridiculous the school supply lists are now versus when we were kids in the 90s. For any of you who may be around my age, I felt like that when I was going through this school supply list. "Oh, we need six glue sticks, each of them labeled with the child's name, and four of them need to be in a Ziploc bag."

Just silly kind of levels of detail of things. That was not the experience when my mother was parenting. But hey, anyway, we do what we got to do. We got it all together and the kids are ready for school. I hope, if you have kids that have gone back to school recently, that that transition is going well for you and getting back in the swing of school times.

Today, I want to talk to you about an important topic for divorced or separated parents, which is best practices for parenting exchanges. What we're talking about here is that time when the children are transitioning back and forth between homes. When parents are no longer together, exchanges are a necessary part of shared parenting responsibilities.

These exchanges can often be stressful or emotionally charged, particularly when you first start them. So early on in this transition, or at a time when there has been conflict that is flaring up in the co-parenting relationship. But with a

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little preparation and cooperation, the exchanges can be made smoother for both the parents and most importantly, the children involved.

And this is true even if there is some underlying conflict that is still going on. You don't have to have a completely conflict-free scenario in order to do the best job that you can at making the exchanges as healthy as possible for your children. Let's discuss first why peaceful exchanges are so important.

For children, moving between two homes can be unsettling. They tend to thrive on routine and stability, and the handover between parents is a transition point where they might feel anxious or conflicted about leaving one parent for another. Ensuring that these moments are calm, respectful, and predictable helps children feel secure and can reduce the emotional toll of having separated parents and going between two homes.

And if you're like many of my clients, you're concerned about reducing the stress on children of navigating going back and forth between two homes, and just generally mitigating the emotional toll that divorce has on children.

For me personally, this is a big "why" behind what I do. I enjoy helping people identify where they can have a significant influence over their child's experience of divorce, and how likely it is that their child is going to transition as best they can into the post-divorce landscape that will be on the forefront for the family.

So let's dive into some best practices that can help create smooth and positive exchanges. The first is: Plan ahead and be punctual. This is one of the simplest yet most effective ways to reduce stress during exchanges. You want to plan ahead and stick to a schedule. Consistency is going to be key.

When children know exactly when and where an exchange will happen, it helps them feel more secure. You want to make sure that both parents understand and agree on the time and the location of the exchange well in advance. This is something that you want to be very clear about long before you're actually going and doing the exchange.

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So where you're going to get this information is going to differ based upon where you are in the divorce process. For example, if you have just separated recently, and you're in separate homes and you don't have orders yet... Whether that's by agreement or by court intervention or however you got your orders; your actual more formal parenting plan that's going to go into, hopefully, your settlement agreement.

If you don't have that yet, then you're at a point where someone's going to have to initiate that conversation and have some particularity in the desired result of that conversation. In terms of, "Okay, when are we going to be exchanging the kids? Where is that going to happen? Who is driving on what end?" You want to be very clear on the logistics about how that's going to happen in advance, so that you are clear on it and so that there are no hiccups in it that the children experience in real time.

If you're further along in the divorce process... and this might be something that you've achieved through mediation, through the two of you talking, through your attorneys talking, maybe through court involvement... the formality of how the exchanges are going to occur is going to depend on where you are in your process.

But regardless of where you are in it, you want to be clear on where that place is going to be and what time it's going to be. Sometimes I have clients who typically get along very well and they think they don't need to put that level of detail into a parenting plan.

And that may be right for some parents, but it can be helpful to have a default in the event of a dispute. So think about, "Where would be a good place for us to do an exchange?" And we'll talk about that a little bit more here in a moment. "What could we agree would be the default in the event that we all of a sudden can no longer agree?"

And that way, again, you have some predictability in the moment of, if we are talking about an upcoming exchange and we don't have agreement now or that's going to happen for some reason, then we know, "Okay, if we don't agree, here's

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where it's going to happen until we do come to a different agreement or a different resolution.”

Have a parenting schedule that is consistent so that your child knows when and where the exchanges are, as well. For example we're not just talking about a location where the exchange is going to happen or a particular time of day, but we're also talking about trying to have a routine weekly parenting schedule that is consistent...

So your child has some awareness of, “Okay, it's Wednesday. Wednesday is the day I go see mom. Wednesday is the day I go to dad's house for the rest of the week.” For some parents, that might be Fridays, right? Fridays can be a popular day for exchanges. So, “Okay, it's Friday. I know on Fridays I change homes.”

...Instead of a parenting schedule that is inconsistent, where one week it's on Mondays, another week it's on Thursdays. This is what contributes to inconsistency, in terms of a child being able to know what to expect. And we know that kids do better whenever there is as much consistency in the parenting schedule as possible.

You want to always aim to be on time for whenever that exchange is going to happen. Because being late can create unnecessary tension and make children feel unsettled. So if you know that you're going to be late, then the appropriate thing to do would be to contact your co-parent as soon as possible and let them know. And see if there's some kind of adjustment that needs to be made so that you don't end up in a situation, for example, where your child is sitting in a neutral location.

Let's just take the example of, say you're exchanging at Target, you're running late to pick up, and your co-parent is bringing your child to the Target parking lot. The child is then sitting there in the parking lot for we don't know how long because you're running late. Listen, life happens. People are going to be late. But you want to think about what the implications are always, not just for yourself, for your co-parent, but what is this like for your child?

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I would imagine that you would want the same type of courtesy extended to you if your co-parent is running late, right? That you be notified so that some kind of alternative adjustments can be made. And also so that your child, most importantly, is aware. So they're not sitting there wondering if the other parent forgot to come get them that particular day. So that they know, "Oh, okay, dad's in traffic. He's going to be here soon."

Okay, number two: We want to mindfully choose our location. Whenever possible, you want to choose a location that you think is going to make the most sense for your child. And also, logistically, what makes the most sense here based on where we all are in the day at the time of the exchange?

So one way that some parents choose to address this is by looking at, based on whatever your parenting schedule is... which you've got to have some idea of what the structure is of the schedule... but based on when that exchange is to take place, what makes sense here?

Sometimes it is a pickup at school. That can be one location that is a neutral location and that is easy for the child. It's a natural time when they're making a transition. So they're coming out of school, they're going home with a parent, and sometimes it is just easier if it's the parent whose parenting time is starting; assuming that that's when the parenting schedule calls for the exchange to happen.

Another plus of exchanging kids at school is that it is useful when there is a lot of conflict between the parents. Because it is a time when you can naturally pick up a child from the care of a third party, in this case, the school. And both parents do not need to be present in order to facilitate that exchange.

So particularly if there is a higher degree of conflict, it can be helpful to structure exchanges in a way where it minimizes the need for both parents to be present at the exchange. It can just be more comfortable, more natural for the child to transition from the school to a parent. And so when we're thinking about what's the easiest on the child here, sometimes pick up from school can be just that.

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Another place for an exchange to consider is at the sending parent's residence. So when I say "sending parent", I mean the parent who's sending the child off to the other parent. The parent whose parenting time is ending, their home can be a pickup place for the parent who is starting their parenting time.

There are a few reasons why this is, or can be at least, depending on the situation, an appropriate exchange location. One of those reasons is that if the child is already at the sending parent's residence, then it's comfortable for them just to be there until the other parent arrives. The child can continue doing whatever it is that they're doing; whether that's doing homework or watching TV or playing or reading.

Whatever it is, they can continue doing whatever activity that they have been doing until they're ready to be exchanged with the other parent. As opposed to if you are exchanging at a midway point, then that's loading the child in the car, having them sit in a parking lot somewhere, waiting for the other parent...

Again, like we just talked about, if there is a parent who's going to be late for that, particularly the parent who's retrieving the child, then we're in a situation where the child is sitting in a car, in a parking lot for a longer period of time. And if you are doing the exchanges at the sending parent's residence, you just avoid that scenario.

Also, sometimes there are concerns by a parent that the other parent is not going to be timely or reliable for making the exchanges happen. And if when your parenting time is starting you're going to retrieve the child from the sending parent, that is a strategy that can be considered in an effort to reduce the lack of reliability of the other parent. Because you're going and you are retrieving the child at the time that your parenting time is starting.

Sometimes there is reluctance to do exchanges at the other parent's home for emotional reasons or safety reasons. Safety reasons is really kind of a whole 'nother topic that I won't go too far into today for lack of time. But if it's an emotional reason, that's something to really consider and work through.

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Determine how you might be able to resolve that issue so that the child can be made as comfortable as possible. If a neutral location is necessary, if you need to have the exchange happen at some other third location, not at either parent's residence, then just think about what might be the most comfortable for the child there.

And what are ways in which you can make that as comfortable as possible for them in the event that the exchange doesn't go quite as punctually as it should? Sometimes if there are safety concerns, there is a tendency to consider doing exchanges at a police station. Again, you're going to know what the right solution is for you. But this is a scenario where I encourage clients to consider.

What do you want your child's experience of exchanging homes to be like? What is the message that gets sent to a child if we're exchanging at a police station?

All right, number three: We want to minimize direct interaction if needed. If tensions are particularly high or if there is a history of conflict, it might be best to minimize direct interaction during exchanges. A strategy that works well for parents of children who are not really little is to do a curbside exchange.

And so what that means is... I mean, that's typically done when you're doing the exchange at the residence of one of the parents, and you open the door to help the kids out, right? Then you stay in the car and watch the children walk from the car to inside the other parents' residence.

That way it creates some physical distance between the parents and there's less of a likelihood of there being a verbal exchange, a physical exchange, or just conflict in general, a reason to talk to one another, right? And so if you're concerned about the conduct of the co-parent, then curbside exchange may be something that would work well, at least for the time being.

The goal here is to keep interactions brief, focused solely on the child, and transitioning the child from one parent to the other. Now, if you have really little



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kids, or if you are in a situation where one or both of the parents live far from wherever you can park the car, this is going to be less possible for you.

For example, if you are in a situation where you have to park a car in a communal parking lot at an apartment complex, and your co-parent lives on the sixth floor, then obviously that's not a situation where it would probably be appropriate to have children walk from the car up to the apartment unsupervised.

In those particular situations, you're going to have to look at what's the best that we can do here? Maybe it's, "I park the car in this particular location and my co-parent is across the parking lot, and we navigate this in a way where it's safe for the children." You still provide some distance between you, right?

Ideally, you would be able to be together at the car and keep interactions brief, and again, focus solely on the transition of the child. So that would be the first preference. But if not, then you've kind of got to work with what the logistics look like of where you're doing the exchange, and figure out, "If we need to put some distance between us, how can we do that here in a way that prioritizes the safety of our children and also allows us a little buffer until we can be in a better place to do this peacefully together?"

Number four is: Maintain a positive demeanor. You always want to strive to maintain a calm and positive demeanor during exchanges. Even if they're unresolved issues, if you're feeling stressed or upset, try to keep things friendly and upbeat in front of the children.

Children are very perceptive and can pick up on even the slightest tension. I know sometimes you might be thinking like you're doing a good job at keeping it from them, but the reality is kids are very dialed in to how their parents are feeling oftentimes.

And so a warm smile and a calm voice can go a long way in making your child feel comfortable and safe. A note here, when your child is going from your care to your co-parent's care, I'm guessing you're probably going to miss them.

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Especially in the beginning, it can be hard to adjust, as a parent, to not having your children as much as you're used to.

So it's normal to feel like you're going to miss them a lot. And it's totally okay for them to understand that you're going to miss them. That being said, you don't want to be overly emotional with the child when you are preparing for an exchange or carrying out an exchange.

And you don't want to tell the child, "I'm going to miss you sooo much when you're gone," or cry. Conduct yourself in a way, whether it's your tone or demeanor, the things that are said, in a way where it will put an emotional burden on them. If your child thinks you're not going to be okay while they're gone, it makes the exchange more stressful for them because they're worrying about whether you're going to be okay or not.

And what we don't want is, even though we might be struggling emotionally inside with what's going on... and it's okay for your child to have some awareness that this is an adjustment for everybody... the more that you give the perception that this is the end of the world for you or the child, or that this is an unbearable thing for you, then the more likely it is that the child is going to have difficulty with the exchanges.

Okay. So I know this is something that is difficult for everybody, but this is one of those things where we get an opportunity to look at how we can do the best that we can do here for our child. And this is one of the ways. It's just being really mindful about what we are saying leading up to an exchange, and during it, and how we can be truthful with our child but not overshare or deliver it in a way that is going to add to what already may be a stressful transition for them. All right?

Number five: Communicate effectively and respectfully. Good communication is crucial in co-parenting. You want to use a respectful tone, avoid arguing in front of the children, and never use your child as a messenger between you and your co-parent.

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If you have issues to discuss, try to do so in a private setting, or through written communication like emails or co-parenting apps. And these apps can also help you keep track of schedules and share important information about the kids without having to engage in direct conversation. If you're going to send someone else to do the pick up or drop off for you, I want to encourage you to consider discussing that in advance.

Ideally, you might have discussed that when you came up with your parenting plan; what to do if either one of you wants to send someone else to do the pick up or drop off. So how is that going to be handled? Are you going to notify one another in advance? Are there people already that everybody's okay with having to serve in that role? Is there anybody that there's conflict over them doing the pickups or drop offs?

This can be one of those areas where if we haven't communicated effectively about a change in who's doing the drop offs or pickups, this can be something that takes the other parent by surprise and they may react in a way that can add to the stress for a child at the exchange.

So you want to think about what might come up there for you, and what you can do to try to work out any issues with who's going to do drop off or pick up in your place, in advance.

All right, number six: Prepare your child in advance for the exchange. You can help your child transition smoothly by preparing them for the exchange. Let them know ahead of time when and where the exchange will happen and what they should expect. This, again, goes back to consistency.

If we're being consistent with this, and we're letting them know what to expect, it makes the transition easier. Encourage them to pack their belongings in advance, and talk about any feelings they might have about the exchange. What I mean here is not to ask them, "Oh, are you worried about going to Dad's? Are you upset about going to Mom's?"

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Again, we don't want to do anything like that. That is going to put stress on them or make them feel like they should feel a particular way. But when you're starting them out on a new routine like this, we want to talk about what it is that you're going to need and help them prepare to pack things that they are going to need while they are in the other parent's care.

Ask them, "Are you feeling prepared for today? Is there anything that I can do to help you get ready to go to Dad's today?" Again, we're talking in an upbeat way, and we are helping them plan. We're not adding to any stress that they may be experiencing.

This preparation helps reduce anxiety and makes the child feel more in control of the situation. Divorce is a time when kids can feel very out of control about what is happening for them. So to the extent that we can help them feel more in control of simple things in their day — where they're going to be, when they're going to be there, what they're going to have access to in terms of their belongings, and things like that — the better you want to think about items they may need to take with them.

What are they going to need to have when they're in the other parent's care? Consider what you can do to support the child in having what they need when they're with your co-parent. Sometimes there are things that there is only one of that the child is going to need. For example, a backpack or medication that they're on; things like that.

Usually there's an expectation that they're going to have basic necessities in both homes. But there may be some things, like school assignments and the backpacks and maybe their glasses or their retainer or whatever it is, that they may not have two of. Okay?

So what are they going to need to successfully transition between the homes? Are they going to need a stuffed animal, that's their favorite stuffed animal, that they just can't sleep without? What can you do? Regardless of what you think the other parent should have for them and they don't. That's a separate issue.

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We want to focus on the situation being what it is. What can I do today to make this as healthy a transition for my child as possible? And if there are necessities that the other parent doesn't have, sure, you can continue to try and address it and get to a resolution of that separately. In the meantime, how can I support my child in this?

What can I easily do here, just to send them with what they're going to need, so that I'm easing the burden on them of this? You want to put yourself in the shoes of the child and consider how you can best help them.

Just because a child is reluctant to go to the other parent's house doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong with the other parent or what happens at their house. This is an important point. So if, when you're talking with your child about preparing them for the exchange, you know that some reluctance has been expressed to go, that does not necessarily mean that something has gone wrong. It can just be a number of different things, really.

But one of them is just that, especially depending on the age of the child, transitions are just hard. And it also can be a situation where they're taking on some responsibility for how the parent they're leaving is doing when they're not there. And so you want to support the child in encouraging them that they're going to have a great time with the other co-parent.

"Everything's going to be okay. I'll be so excited to see you when you come back." You want to convey, in the substance of what you're saying and in the tone, that everything is fine and the child is going to have a successful time with the other parent, while also validating any feelings that they may have.

All right. Number seven: Stay focused on the child's needs. During your exchange, you want to focus on your child's needs and feelings. Ask them how their day was. Just keep it simple and normal conversation. Express interest in what they may be sharing with you when they return from the other parent's home, without quizzing them on what they did at the other parent's home.

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And if you're sending them to the other parent's home, maybe you can talk about something that they're looking forward to, like, "Oh, it'll be great that you'll be able to spend this week with Dad. What are you looking forward to?" Just anything that you can do to support your child in that relationship that is not designed to quiz them or interrogate them about what they're doing with the other parent.

You want to let them share with you what they want to share. This helps the child see the exchange as a positive transition rather than something that is negative or stressful.

Number eight: Avoid discussing adult issues. Exchanges are not the time to discuss adult issues, or concerns about the co-parenting arrangement, or any other personal disputes that you have with your co-parent. Save those conversations for another time when the kids are not present.

Keeping adult issues separate from parenting exchanges helps maintain a stress-free environment for the child. So even if this is really difficult... Maybe you're in the middle of your divorce and you just got a letter from your soon-to-be former spouse's attorney that was insulting, and you're just completely enraged. I totally get it. This is just not the time when you want to address it. We want to address that where the children aren't going to witness it.

Number nine: We want to model respectful behavior. Remember that you are modelling behavior for your child. When they see you in an exchange, they are seeing you navigate what may be a difficult situation. Showing respect for your co-parent, even if it's difficult, teaches your child about maturity, respect and how to handle challenging situations and maybe even challenging people.

Maybe your co-parent is a difficult person. How do you want your child to see you handling difficult people? What can you teach them about what it's like to deal with difficult people in life? What is the example that you want to set? It's about creating a stable, loving environment for your kids, even when you're not living under the same roof, right? That should be the common goal.

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Number ten: Be flexible and adaptable. While consistency is important, flexibility is also important. Life happens, and there are going to be times when plans need to change. So if your co-parent is running late, or something unexpected comes up, try to be understanding and adapt as needed.

I'm going to venture that at some point you are going to need the same understanding and flexibility. So this is where we're going to give a little bit to get a little bit. And even if you give, you're not going to get it in return. I get that. Sometimes there are those situations. But again, even if it's not for your benefit, look at how it may be in your child's benefit to have some flexibility and adaptability.

This flexibility shows your child that while things don't always go as planned, you can handle unexpected changes calmly and cooperatively. Again, we're showing kids not only how to handle these situations with their parent, their other parent; not just in this limited situation. For them, it teaches them things in general that they can apply to other life situations.

So to wrap up today, successful parenting exchanges are about cooperation, respect, and focusing on the well-being of your child by planning ahead, maintaining a positive attitude, and prioritizing your child's needs. You can make these exchanges smoother and less stressful for everyone involved.

Remember, the goal is to create a supporting and loving environment for your child. And that starts with how you handle these transitions. Even if you have a co-parent who isn't doing a good job with this, even one parent who can rise above and handle these exchanges as best as possible is going to help your child do better, and also help you create a scenario where you are managing conflict as effectively as you can rather than unnecessarily escalating it.

Thank you so much for tuning in this week, and I will see you in the next episode.

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