

## When Parents Relocate: Moving Away and Long-distance Parenting

Our society is certainly a mobile one. The average North American family changes residence every five years and many families move even more often than that. Some families just move around the corner or across town so they don't experience disruption in their lifestyles, habits or relationships. Others, however, move across the state, across the country or beyond, and everyone involved has to make major adjustments.

No one worries when a Mom and Dad who live together decide to relocate their family. Children, particularly teen-agers, may object to moving but they are usually able to successfully adapt. It is a different story when parents live apart and one of them proposes to move their children so far that school, activities, relationships and parental contact are disrupted.

Parents planning a move are generally confident their reasons are good ones; parents opposing a move are usually equally certain they are not. Children may embrace a move or resist it. They may find parental disagreement an opportunity to manipulate their parents, or use it to avoid appropriate parental control. Children are vulnerable in such circumstances. While they eventually adjust to the new situation, children are often stressed or emotionally harmed if conflict between their parents persists.

In this brochure we will explore why people seek to move, look at how to remain aware of your children's needs, and discuss how to balance the needs of your children with your rights as a parent when this most challenging issue arises.

### **Q:** Why do parents want to move with their children?

**A:** There are as many reasons as there are parents. Some of the more common ones are:

- A job transfer or promotion.
- A new job or business opportunity.
- For education or vocational training.
- Marriage to someone living far away.
- A new partner is being transferred for work.
- To move close to family where there will be support.

These are all valid reasons to consider a move. The question, however, is not whether the reason for the move is valid, but whether the move meets the needs of the children. If you were not the moving parent, would you want your children to move? What effect will long distances have on your son or daughter? Remember to think more about what your children think and feel, and less about what you want as an independent adult. If you do move, consider ways to reduce risk that accompanies the loss of attachment. Remember that your children are depending on you to make lifelong decisions for them.

### **Keeping the focus on the children**

Parents can move whenever they wish. However, moving with your children requires input from both parents. Before you move you should talk

with the other parent. Try to focus on the issues related to moving, not other adult issues. If you cannot communicate effectively with the other parent, consider using mediation to resolve the issues and work out the details.

Once it has been decided that one parent will relocate, both parents will need to decide how each of them will continue to be involved in their children's lives. Maintaining and promoting the parent-child relationship at a distance requires commitment and cooperation from both parents. Although it isn't easy, it can be done. Remember, your child has a right to have a relationship with both parents.

### **Parenting at a distance**

Parents who live far from one another might find it helpful to develop a parenting plan that details the obligations and responsibilities of each parent and addresses the unique issues of parenting at a distance. A mediator may be able to help you develop a parenting plan. Some questions you may want to address in your parenting plan may include:

### **Q:** When will each parent spend time with the children?

**A:** The frequency and amount of time children spend with each parent may be based on the distance between the parents' homes, the ages of the children and the cost of transportation. If the distance is shorter and the travel affordable, parents may decide they are able to see their child on a frequent basis. If the distance is great and travel costly, parents may decide that it is best for their children to spend large blocks of time with the non-residential parent, such as during summer vacation or winter holidays.

### **Q:** What will be the mode of transportation when the children travel between homes?

**A:** Children may need an adult to accompany them on the trip because airlines, passenger trains and bus companies have age requirements for independent travel. Regardless of age, some children are better able to travel alone than others. Sometimes transportation can be linked with personal or business travel.

### **Q:** Who will bear the cost and responsibility for making travel arrangements?

**A:** Travel is expensive and fares can vary widely, depending on travel dates, days of the week and overnight stays. Connections to smaller cities can be very expensive. Will one parent pay for travel or will the costs be shared? It is important for both parents to help make travel arrangements as convenient, safe, comfortable and inexpensive as possible. Both parents should have a copy of the itinerary in advance of the actual travel.

### **Q:** How will parents and children communicate from a distance?

**A:** In this high-tech age, parents have found creative ways to maintain contact with their children. Depending on the age of your children, telephone, e-mail, instant messaging, faxes, photos, videotapes, mail and audiotapes offer ways to stay connected to your children from a distance. Make sure to discuss who will be responsible for the cost of any long distance calls, Internet service or other charges for communication.

**Q: How will parents communicate with one another from a distance?**

**A:** Living a long distance from one another does not eliminate the need to communicate about your children. You need to define the nature of your communication. Will you have regular, scheduled contact or only when something out of the ordinary arises? Will communication be by telephone, e-mail or another method of communication? What information will be shared? You will need to exchange school, medical and legal data, and information about the children's activities.

Parents usually find this type of information easy to obtain when both are in the same community but it can be quite difficult to acquire from a distance. Regular contact with a former partner may feel artificial or uncomfortable, but communicating only about problems may fill contacts with tension. Consider which will work best in your situation. Remember to keep the focus on the children's needs, not the parents' relationship.

**Q: What opportunities will each parent have to develop new family traditions?**

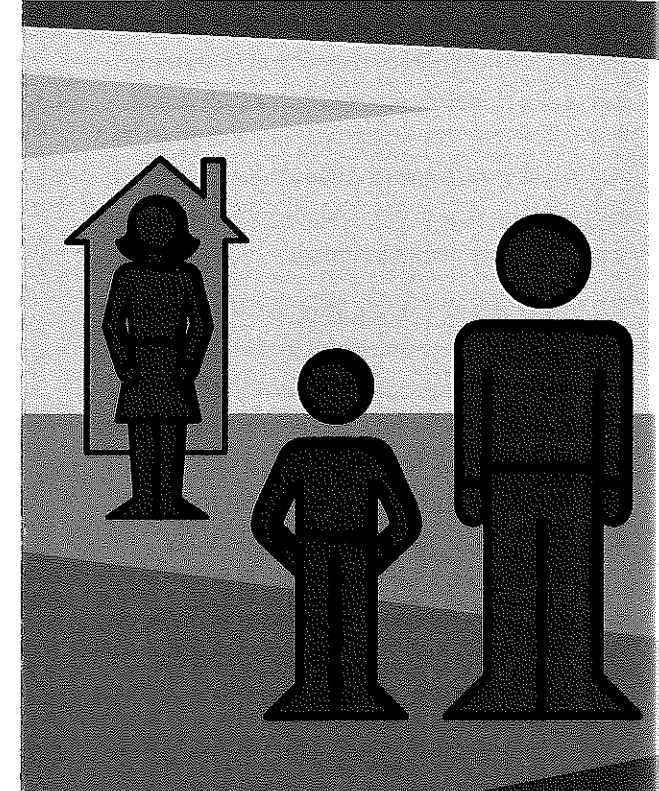
**A:** Living at a distance will result in changes to old family habits. Try to establish some permanent holiday plans or other new traditions so the children will have these important anchors.

**Conclusion**

The adult decision to relocate does not negate the children's right to meaningful relationships with both parents. With creativity, perseverance and commitment, both parents can work together to effectively honor their children's right.

The adult decision to relocate may have significant legal consequences. If you have further questions about relocation, please contact the family court services agency or bar association in your community.

**When Parents Relocate:  
MOVING  
AWAY AND  
LONG-DISTANCE  
PARENTING**



---

*Prepared by AFCC members Larry Fong, Elayne Greenberg and Doneldon Dennis.*

Additional copies of this brochure may be purchased from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts

Order on-line at [www.afccnet.org](http://www.afccnet.org) or contact:



Phone: 608.664.3750  
Fax: 608.664.3751  
E-mail: [afcc@afccnet.org](mailto:afcc@afccnet.org)  
Web: [www.afccnet.org](http://www.afccnet.org)

© 2003 Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.  
All rights reserved.

