

# Navigating Midlife



A SERIES DESIGNED TO MEET THE CONCERNS AND NEEDS OF OUR AGING POPULATION

## Divorced Dads.... Another Midlife Change

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Midlife brings many changes but one thing that doesn't change is parenthood. Even if you are divorced, you are still a parent. It is especially important to continue with your parenting role even if you have divorced. Fatherhood is an important midlife issue. Once divorced, many fathers are faced with the reality of visitation. In many cases, visitation is very limited, compared to the relationship dads used to be able to enjoy, so it's absolutely crucial that dads make this visitation time the best possible experience for their children and themselves. Here are a few ideas for making the most of your visitation:

### ***Give it Time***

There's an old saying that says time can heal all wounds. But time is only half of the equation. Healing old wounds also takes a commitment to getting better. Soccer players who've torn a ligament just don't give up. They gradually work themselves back into top playing form. Fathers who have gone through a bitter divorce may find that it feels like they've got a torn ligament between themselves and their kids. Calling upon the fathering part of yourself may be painful and feel awkward at first, but with time, patience and practice, it does get better.

### ***No "Mr." Mom***

Never try to be a mom. You'll only set yourself up for failure because men are not moms, men are dads. First, your children expect you to be fatherly. Do the things you always did.

If you were a husband who cooked, continue to cook. If you didn't cook, don't try to "show-off" for your kids by attempting to whip-up some gourmet meal. Rather, be honest with your kids, and invite them to learn with you, on whatever you're attempting.

Look for ways you can include them in your life and ways you can continue to be involved in theirs. Second, you just won't feel quite right. Trying to be something (a mom) that you're not is like trying to wear your shoes on the wrong feet. You may be able to do it for a little while, but it is awkward.

### ***Avoid Conflict***

If your marriage ended with an unresolved war, you will most likely need to work harder to make visitation for you and your kids smoother. Men who have negotiated a bitter divorce or custody battle need to remember that any unresolved conflict they feel about their former family life rests with their ex-wife, not their kids. And you should never openly battle or degrade your former wife in front of your children. Remember that she's still their mom, even though she's anything but your honey. Being aware that you still harbor negative feelings toward your former spouse can help you avoid directing them toward your children when it's "your weekend." Awareness can also help you put your hurt and anger behind you.

### ***Avoid Over-scheduling***

It is OK just to be in each other's presence. It is OK just to watch television together. It is OK not to have to talk.

Even though you may have a hundred and one things you want to talk with your children about doesn't mean they want to.

They may need time to themselves for a while, just to be, rather than to be doing. Talk with your kids about the types of activities they would like to do. Ask them how they would like to spend their time with you. Be open and honest about your likes and dislikes. Over time, you'll establish a natural rhythm that will transform what seems to you as "fathering by appointment" into wonderful memories and strong bonds with your children.

### ***Don't Push***

Accept the fact that your children are living in two separate households. Going from one home to the other causes children to feel the emotional equivalent to jet lag. Kids need time to get reacquainted not only with you, but also with their surroundings. Avoid making it harder for them to adjust by imposing a radically different set of rules or value system or by making them feel bad about the different system at their mother's.

Children have a tough enough time trying to sort through and make personal sense of all the values and beliefs they are being taught. Your goal is to create as little confusion as possible. It's a delicate balance you're trying to achieve – influencing rather than inflicting. You'll never go wrong if you're focused on the needs of your child.

### ***When They Resist***

There are many reasons why your children may resist visitation. They may not like the woman you're dating or are married to or the new family you are living in. Some kids reach an age when friends, activities and other interests become important and they are no longer willing to devote as much time to you alone.

You can't bribe, argue or coerce your kids into spending time with you. You may have to wait until they can accept the changes in your life. Whatever their reasons, try to set aside your fears and insecurities. Be supportive, listening and accepting of their feelings. Make it clear that your door is always open, and there is always a place for your child in your heart and home.

That's not to say it doesn't hurt when your child appears to be rejecting you, it does. But the hurt will pass and it doesn't mean you're losing your child.

It's just part of the divorce you have to get through and move beyond. And you will. Remember that you're relationship with your child will last a lifetime. They will think differently next year and the years after. Your understanding now will pay off for both of you in the future.

### ***You're Still a Dad***

It's important for every divorced dad to remember that even though he is no longer a husband, he is still a father. Even though the warm, loving, intimate relationship with your former spouse is over, your children continue to need and crave a warm, loving, and involved dad in whom they can confide. Give yourself and your children the time, space, patience, unconditional love and acceptance you and they need.

### ***Resources***

Here are a few Internet web sites you may find useful:

**National Center for Fathering**  
<http://www.fathers.com>

**Parents Place.com Fathering Reading Room**  
<http://www.parentsplace.com/readroom>

**Fathering Magazine**  
<http://www.fathermag.com>



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