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## A child's summer vacation can be fun for divorced parents, but plan ahead

For most children, summer is the best time of the year. The summer break provides more time to spend outdoors, with friends and most excitingly — no school. However, for families going through divorce, the summer heat can also create more tension. This is especially true for co-parents.

Summer parenting time often differs from regularly scheduled parenting time. Children's schedules are not only packed with summer camps, sports and other activities, but parents want to vacation with their children and make up for parenting time which may have been lost during the school year.

It is important to make clients aware of these seasonal changes and help them come up with strategies to minimize conflict between the parents. This will help children get the most out of their summer vacation.

Some ways to maximize your client's summer parenting time include:

**Planning ahead:** To help everyone grasp the summer schedule, plan several weeks, or months, in advance. Do not wait until the child begins their summer break to come up with a summer parenting schedule. If parties are prone to conflict, it may be helpful to memorialize agreements with an agreed order. This will help conflict-prone parties stay on track, as they have both agreed and had the court sign off on said agreement.

While summer schedules are meant to be more flexible, scheduling various summer camps, vacations and sporting events can be like putting a puzzle together when two parents are involved. Remind parents of these challenges and encourage them to create a plan with the other parent.

Furthermore, vacations should be planned well in advance. It is important for both parents to work together in coordinating their vacations. Surprising the other parent or a child with a last-minute vacation can throw off the

entire schedule. Everyone likes routine, especially children.

**Sticking to a schedule:** Maxine Weiss Kunz, a founding member and partner of Weiss-Kunz & Oliver LLC, said that in her experience, an important thing for parents to balance is flexibility and structure.

In the summertime, especially, having a routine but allowing adjustability in that routine makes for an easier summer. The schedule can most certainly entail "fun days," but the child should be informed about what is going on from day to day.

Another piece of advice that Weiss-Kunz offers to divorced or separated parents is to keep a calendar in both homes. Synchronized calendars are a great tool that families can use to maintain consistency. By doing so, families can get a sense of relaxation.

**Listening to the children:** Weiss-Kunz opines that starting around age 6, when a child is finishing kindergarten, parents should take their child's summer activity preferences into consideration. Around age 6, children begin showing preferences. For example, a child might prefer basketball camp over drama camp, even if they have been participating in drama since age 4.

Weiss-Kunz said, "The best gift we can give a child is friendship. Summer is a great time to facilitate that." This is an important sentiment to remind your client of.

The older a child gets, the more consideration their opinions should be given. It is imperative to be mindful of a maturing child's schedule when vacations and activities are being planned. Summer becomes more about a child's social group than their activities and vacations. Remind your client that this may be hard to grasp, but every teenager goes through that phase and it has nothing to do with the other parent.

**Supporting the other parent's activities:** Divorce is difficult. It is a change of lifestyle. This includes summer vacations. Instead of being included on every one, there will come time when your client



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watches through social media while their children are on vacation without them and with the other parent.

Remind your client how important it is to be supportive of all of the fun trips and activities their children are afforded, especially with the other parent.

Summer is the perfect time to create lifelong memories because of how flexible travel schedules can be. Children should not feel guilty about going on vacation with another parent.

Parents can show their support by doing research projects with their child on the vacation destination. Vacations are meant to be relaxing, if children are worrying about their other parent's hurt feelings, instead of taking in their surroundings, it only hinders them.

For example, if a child has the opportunity to go to Italy with one parent, this is reason for celebration, not self-serving comments or actions. Researching the Coliseum or Italian cuisine will ensure the child leaves their guilt at the door.

**Extended parenting time:** For some families, summer is a time where one parent is given extended parenting time to make up for lost time during the school year. This time can be due to the distance in living arrangements, extended vacations or other arrangements.

It is important to plan the time, type and duration of communication when one child is away from one of their parents for such an extended amount of time. With

Skype, FaceTime and texting, it is easier now more than ever to stay in touch. These platforms provide for long distance and meaningful conversations with his or her children.

One strategy is to have clients plan their trips or fun activities when their child is away on vacation or exercising extended parenting time with the other parent. This can help take their mind off not being able to see their child and it gives them something to look forward to.

It is important for clients with extra parenting time to be mindful of the child's established routine from their other household. Although it is important to maintain your own, autonomous parenting style, children adapt better to changes in circumstance when there is some form of stability and congruency between the two households.

**Getting back into a routine:** As the school year gets closer, it is important to get back into a routine. Because children will typically start their day earlier during the school year, it is important to ease the children back into a schedule.

Showering, brushing teeth and eating breakfast are all important steps to waking up that a child must get accustomed to. Weiss-Kunz suggests that no less than three days before school starts, children should begin their school year routines again. However, Weiss-Kunz said that a week is better.

Over the summer, it is important for children to feel relaxed. For them, summer is a time to unwind, play with friends and let the mind rest. The summer also provides time to enhance their relationships with both parents.

Planning ahead and sticking to a routine, although more flexible than during the school year, can optimize a child's summer vacation and enhance a co-parenting relationship.

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