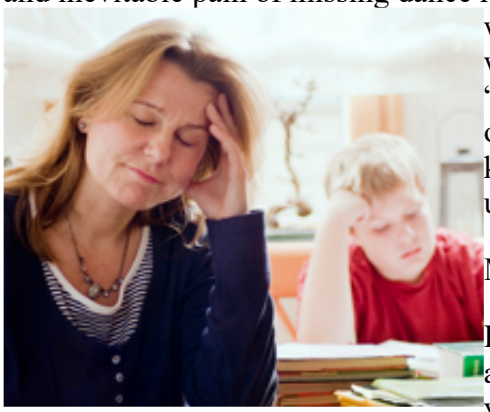
Parenting challenges: conflicting schedules

With workweeks that are a far cry from Monday-to-Friday, nine-to- five, to visitation and blended families, more and more parents are raising their kids within the confines of conflicting schedules. The inconsistency and inevitable pain of missing dance recitals, family dinners, the big game or first steps may leave you wondering how your lifestyle is affecting your children. You may worry about the lack of spontaneous family time together, "overscheduled" kids or feelings of abandonment. With a little more organization and a lot of conscious effort, however, you can raise your kids into healthy, happy and well-adjusted adults, despite an unconventional schedule.



Make it all work

Regardless of extended absences or conflicting schedules, you can be an involved and active parent and a big part of your child's life. To help you and your family survive and thrive amongst these challenges, be sure to:

Plan ahead. Invest in a big family calendar to help everyone manage their complicated timelines. Display it in a common area of the house and so that work demands, meal plans, designated family time, custody schedules and any of your child's' commitments are clearly laid out. If your spouse is gone on business you can count down the days until their return and even map out the travel route with your kids. Keep a master schedule for the year to help you plan birthdays, holidays and extracurricular activities. It's not going to be easy but organization is key!

Celebrate now. Shared custody or work commitments will inevitably get in the way of some significant events. If you weren't able to make an important milestone, re-celebrate it as soon as you can. Make sure you even stop to acknowledge the little events that may have been lost in the shuffle like a lost tooth or an A+ on an assignment. You may not have been there but you can and should be able to celebrate with your child.

Make time count. When it comes to difficult family schedules, you need to focus on quality versus quantity. While the amount of time is important, make the best use of the moments you do have together. If your family can't be in the same place for dinner, have a big Sunday lunch instead. Or bring your kids to the park rather than hitting the gym. If you're finally in the same place on a weekend but there's lots of housework to do, try to make it a family affair. Get everyone to contribute and after the chores are finished unwind together over a movie or an outing to a museum, mall or amusement park.

Aim for consistency. Although it's good for kids to learn to be flexible, consistency is still the golden rule of good parenting. Make sure you have similar expectations for bedtime, discipline, household duties and schoolwork regardless of who's is looking after your children. If your kids lost TV privileges while under the care of someone else, make sure you follow through with it and do the same thing when you're rewarding good behaviour. If you don't get the kids as often as you'd like or are busy with work commitments, resist the urge to drop routine and spoil your kids when you finally get your time together.

Be resourceful. You're going to have to get a little creative to maximize your time together and to reinforce consistency in your child's life. If you're leaving home for business, give your child a copy of a book and bring one with you on your travels. While away, call home before bedtime so you can read the story together over the phone. Also consider communicating to your family via video conferencing while on the road. Cell phones are a great way to keep in regular contact (if your kids are old enough). In the twenty-first century, being away doesn't mean you have to be absent.

Keep it manageable. As a busy family with a hectic schedule, try to pick extracurricular activities that will work within your lifestyle. Despite wanting to offer your children every opportunity, recognize that taking on too much will only cause further stress and that leaving no room for down time can negatively impact your kids.

Find alone time. Amidst all your daily demands, it can become nearly impossible to get some time to yourself. Try waking up earlier in the morning so you have a few quiet moments before the kids get up. Consider adding a bit of extra time at daycare, or use an after school program so you can run important errands after work. An evening out every once in a while is a must, so find your family a babysitter you trust. If you're still with your partner, but parent through conflicting schedules, plan regular dates for just the two of you. Ban any talk of finances or parenting and save these details for later.

Successful co-parenting

Co-parenting after a separation or divorce can add an additional element of tension to the mix. In times of conflict, scheduling can become a frequent bone of contention. Keep schedules running smoothly and frazzled nerves at bay by:

Not using children as a go-between. Don't use your kids as messengers. Although it can be tempting to send bills, notes and messages through your children it can be very hard on them—regardless of the situation. If possible, keep the lines of communication open with the other parent and try to co-ordinate as a team.

Dealing with schedule changes in advance. Whether you need your ex to take a day off while you're away on business, or want to bring the kids to a family reunion, be considerate: ensure you give plenty of notice and arrange for time to be made up elsewhere. Giving advance notice shows respect and helps avoid "surprises" that can cause tempers to flare.

Asking instead of telling. When you need to make a schedule change, try phrasing your needs to your ex as a question. E.g., "Would you mind it if I picked Josh up at six instead of five?" versus, "I need to pick Josh up at five." Though the idea is the same framing it as a question seems less confrontational and demanding.

Sticking to the schedule. Whenever possible, ensure that you follow up with your end of the deal. Remember, ignoring the schedule isn't just hard on your ex-partner, it can put unnecessary stress on your kids too—especially if it becomes a point of conflict. Respect each other's time and stick to the agreement.

With changing lifestyles and increasing financial pressures families today are often far from traditional. Despite the challenges your schedule and lifestyle can create, if handled properly, your children may actually enjoy many added benefits. Spending time alone with each parent separately can create extremely strong relationships. A little irregularity can produce well-adjusted and flexible kids and busy schedules may teach your children to be the mightiest of multi-taskers. Recognize that you aren't alone and that amongst the chaos, you can and will be a great parent.