

Frequently Asked Questions **About Access**

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Introduction

Access is meant to safeguard a child's right to parental love and care upon divorce. It is also one of the primary responsibilities which divorced parents have to fulfill. For some divorced families, access can be a major source of conflict, which causes tremendous stress and even irreversible harm to the children psychologically. On the contrary, access, if handled well, would facilitate post-divorce adjustment of children significantly. This pamphlet is intended to answer access-related questions that commonly concern divorced parents, and to help them provide a nurturing and harmonious environment for their children.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the purpose of access?

Access provides an opportunity for the child to spend time with the non-residential parent following divorce. It helps to ensure that the child can maintain a continuing relationship with both parents despite the separation. It also helps to make the child feel secure and loved so that he/she can adapt to the family changes better and his/her resilience can be strengthened.





2. Why is access very important?

Research has shown that good parent-child relationships and active involvement of the non-residential parent in the child's life can act as a buffer against various stresses associated with divorce. Regular access would be one significant opportunity for parents to demonstrate their ongoing support to optimize the child's overall positive development, notwithstanding it being the child's basic right to enjoy the love and guidance offered by each parent.

3. What is the role of the residential parent in access?

Although access primarily involves the non-residential parent and the child, for it to work, the commitment and cooperation of both parents are crucial. If the residential parent genuinely supports and encourages access, the child can visit the non-residential parent without any emotional burden. The residential parent should make the best effort not to use access as a weapon for controlling, punishing or checking on the former spouse (e.g. to stop access if there is no child support payment), and should not treat the child as a messenger between parents. Otherwise, the child will be caught in a bind and feel burdened and stressed.



4. What is the role of the non-residential parent in access?

The non-residential parent should treat access as his or her responsibility to the child. It is important to bear in mind that to build up a positive parent-child relationship, the quality as well as the quantity of the time spent together count. Therefore parents should take each visit seriously and follow through the agreed access plans consistently as far as possible. If a parent just walks in and out of the child's life casually, the child may think that the parent does not love him or her and feel rejected and sad. Likewise, the non-residential parent should also make the best effort to keep a rational attitude and not to use access as a tool for controlling, punishing or checking on the former spouse.

5. What makes a good access plan?

Generally speaking, an access plan that promotes regular and loving exchanges between the non-residential parent and the child would be in the child's best interests. Stability and flexibility are important in access arrangements. In determining the amount of contact, the child's age and developmental needs should be considered. For example, it is desirable to set more flexible access schedules for teenagers who tend to be heavily engaged in school or social activities. Apart from the child development factors, the availability of each parent from work or other obligations should also be taken into account. Most importantly, to achieve a favourable outcome, both parents should work together to make access plans mutually agreeable.

Also remember to make plans for vacations and special occasions such as the parents' birthdays. To avoid disputes, both parents may consider dividing holidays equally or alternating them annually. But even after agreements are reached, some unforeseeable circumstances may come up and renegotiations may then be required to accommodate the needs of the child and the parents.





6. How should access time be spent?

The time spent during access should be positive and pleasurable. As the non-residential parent may not get to see the child as much after divorce, he or she may become more indulgent towards the child and express affection by providing a large amount of material things. These are probably attempts to compensate for the child's losses, but it is really not a good idea to do so. In fact, most children will adjust well when the visits are carried out in a natural manner, like part of their family lives. Activities that suit the child's interests would add fun to the access time, and what matters most is the involvement of the non-residential parent in the process. Consistent and reasonable discipline is indispensable too.

7. Should the non-residential parent include his or her new partner during access?

Access is intended for fostering the relationship between the non-residential parent and the child. When the new partner is present, chances are some of the parent's attention may get diverted from the child inadvertently, which may upset the child. Although the participation of other people may dilute the parent-child experience, it should not be ruled out altogether, especially in cases where the child actually welcomes and enjoys the interactions with the non-residential parent's significant others.

8. What if problems arise in access?

The parents should stay calm and sensible when the child appears distressed during exchange times, makes complaints before or after access, or refuses access with the non-residential parent. The essential thing to do is to find out what possibly brings about the observed or stated problems. It is not helpful to assume immediately that the other parent has done something bad to the child. For instance, a very young child may get upset due to the transitions between two homes rather than not wanting to meet the non-residential parent. Anyway, the child's feelings and concerns should be addressed with patience and care.

If the child persistently refuses to see the non-residential parent, professional counselling may be considered. Moreover, if both parents continue to have disagreements over the access arrangement, it is worthwhile to seek professional help and/or family mediation services to help them reach consensus and rebuild their cooperation.



9. Can access be supervised and when is this necessary?

There are some special situations in which access may need to be carried out in the presence of a social worker to ensure the child's safety and welfare, including cases with issues related to child abuse, family violence, serious mental disorders of parents, or intense parental conflicts. It should be noted that supervised access is ordered by Court and all the involved parties have an obligation to follow the access arrangement stipulated in the Court Order.



If you need help on access matters, you may call the Social Welfare Department Hotline at 2343 2255, or contact the Integrated Family Services Centres located in your district.

