

Child handover arrangements when co-parenting

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Child handover for parents and children can be complicated, difficult and a source of anxiety for all involved. When parents are co-parenting after separation, it is important for children, that handover is simple and cordial, and provides children with the least likely feeling of being tugged between parents.

Why the manner of child handover is important in family law

There is nothing worse for a child to feel caught in the middle of conflicting parents. Or alternatively, recognising their parents cannot even say hello to one another when they move from one house to the next.

Barrister from Victoria, Darren Mort, has produced some compelling resources for parents who are struggling with handover and co-parenting with their former spouse.

The book, Tommy & Terry Tiger, is a story which is read to children to help them feel they are not alone with separated parents. The book is designed to assist children to make sense of the separation of their parents. You can purchase the book using this link.

In addition to the story, a short film was released regarding Tommy. It is a tragic story to watch a small boy being passed between two homes, trying to make sense of the conflicting parenting styles and, importantly, the devastating conflict between his two parents.

One thing both resources do is encourage parents to “do better”, put the child first and give children space to understand the change occurring in their lives.

There is no handbook on how to successfully achieve the best handover for children, however, when interviewing children or hearing from other parents, there are simple steps which can be taken for children not to feel like a parcel being exchanged

between their parents.

Tips on child handover for parents who are co-parenting

Where possible, where you can use a school or daycare as a handover location, this is ideal. One parent drops the children off at school or daycare, and the other parent collects them. This arrangement provides no contact between the two parents and space in the day for the child to digest moving between the two homes. It is also a good idea to let the school or daycare facility know what your arrangements are and keep them informed if these arrangements change.

When you select a time for handover, find a time that suits the child. Young children don't have handover in the middle of their daytime sleep. For older children, consider if early morning handover on a weekend (on their only day to sleep in) is going to be conducive to a positive experience for either parent.

Where possible (and the parents reside close together), if parents can be cordial, handover at each other's homes is always preferred. Children who have handover at petrol stations, McDonald's or a local park, for example, recognise their parents do not allow the other to spend time in their home. It is a weekly/fortnightly reminder of the hostility felt between each parent.

You do not need to be best friends, however, exchanging pleasantries, being polite, helping with bags can demonstrate to your child that even though Mum & Dad are not together, we are still respectful, kind and well-mannered. This can bode well for life lessons as your children get older.

Be organised – moving between two homes is stressful enough for children. Help them with the items they need to move between the homes. A musical instrument, swimming gear, school bags – it's a time to be patient and assist in the organisation of changing homes regularly.

Be on time – this is respectful to the other parent and helps in ensuring the other parent is not disgruntled at handover. If you are running late, send a simple text message and let the other parent know. Let the child know you have texted the other parent. This way, they can see the courteous exchange.

Rise above any conflict – if the other parent makes a side-swiping remark, a "dig", rise above it and ignore it. With many children I interview in my role as an Independent Children's Lawyer, they rarely speak of the arrangements for where they're sleeping, dinner with the other parent, fun activities etc. What they do tell you about is when parents argue or fight in front of them.

After handover, do not question your child incessantly about what they did at the other parent's house. Where possible, let the child lead the conversation in the car. Talk about other things which have occurred since the child was not with you. Anything

you need to know will come out; it doesn't need to be told on the drive home immediately after handover.

If you are concerned there will be conflict between you and your former spouse or your own safety is compromised, take a third party (who is calm and respectful) with you to handover to assist in the exchange.

The above tips are just a general guide to assist you. Not all of them will work for everyone, and each person's circumstances are individual.

What is the take home for amicable co-parenting during handover?

There is no perfect way to handover children or to share time with children after separation. It is a reminder for children they live in two separate homes. However, it is an obligation on parents to make the most of the situation and focus on the child.

Regularly we are told, whether in Court or at conferences, it is not separation which affects children, it is conflict. Keep this in mind when you are communicating about the other parent or to the other parent, with children present or within hearing distance.

When do I need a lawyer for children's matters in family law?

Separation is difficult. When children are involved, it can be incredibly traumatic, and parents can be emotionally charged. This affects their ability to offer solutions which are child-focused and conflict-avoidant.

During this vulnerable stage, it is often the most important time to reach out to a lawyer for knowledge to assist you in making informed decisions.

The involvement of a lawyer does not need to be hostile or cause more animosity. It can be a crucial step in offering solutions which may not have been considered.

Even just a first appointment with an experienced family lawyer can provide you with some guidance to assist both yourself and ultimately, your children.

The information contained in this article is of general nature and should not be construed as legal advice. If you require further information, advice or assistance for your specific circumstances, please contact us.