

Parenting after the Cult



Raising children is a demanding process under any circumstances. Helping children find their way in a new place that's strange to you, too, doesn't make it any easier.

Or, if you had to leave children behind in a group whose values and practices you have rejected, you may face constant difficulties in your efforts to stay in touch and eventually reunite with them.

In light of the ever-growing body of research about raising children, "parenting" may sound like a highly-skilled occupation. But, in fact, much of what we do as parents—

- keeping our children safe and healthy,
- teaching them the values that we cherish, and
- loving and supporting them emotionally

is age-old tradition.

There is no simple formula, and no single path that works for every parent or for every child. All the research aside, it's up to the parents to decide what their

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children need and what's best for them.

The information in this section is intended to clarify issues and options, and to offer some suggestions, not to dictate any one model of parenting.



If Children Are with You

Depending on their experiences in the group, children's reactions to leaving can range from intense relief and satisfaction to intense hostility and anger. Their feelings can change from moment to moment, depending on the situation. Conflicting emotions may be present simultaneously—relief from fear of physical punishment, for instance, side by side with frustration over all the new things they must learn.

What to Tell Children about Leaving

What you tell your children about leaving depends on the age and personality of the child, and on your own situation. Coming up with answers that are both honest and age-appropriate can be a real challenge. Think ahead about how best to explain this to your children, and don't hesitate to take your time—**"I need to think about that so I can answer you clearly and correctly."**—when you are confronted with a question you're not prepared for.

Children with a parent, grandparents, or close friends in the group don't need to

hear that it's a "bad" place, or that members are "wrong." Such generalizations are often not very meaningful to them, but may make them think that it is also "bad" or "wrong" that they love and miss those people.

If they have a parent still in the group, they may interpret your condemnation to mean that their parent is "bad" or "wrong." Even if that is true, hearing it could lead them to think they themselves are in some way tainted.

Explanations that avoid disparaging those still in the group might include:

- **"I still love [names of the people in the group], but I've come to understand that it's better for us to try something new because so much in the group was not good for us."**
- **"It was a difficult decision for me to leave; but while we were in [the group], I could not raise you the way I wanted to or give you what you need to be a strong, capable grown-up."**
- Or, if it was a Bible-based group, **"I prayed about this decision a long time. We're not giving up God, and I'm sure God is not giving up on us. We're learning more about God."**

Very young children may need little or no

explanation, especially if they have their usual comfort—a stuffed toy or a blanket—with them.

Elementary school-aged children need simple, specific, but truthful explanations, like

“I decided I could take better care of you this way.”

Or

“I want you to have a better education.”

Or

“We all need to learn about life outside the group.”

Adolescents—preteens and teens—will have their own opinions (which may change frequently). They may be thrilled to be out on one day, and sad and regretful the next. It may be quite difficult—for them as well as for you—to figure out where they really stand.

- There is no need for you to get involved in complex explanations or discussions that may touch on matters you don't want to share with them.

“These questions are between your father [or mother] and me. It isn't right for you to get involved in them.”

- It is a good idea to listen to a

teenager's oppositional viewpoint,
but generally not a good idea to
get into an argument. A simple
statement, like

**"I'm sorry you feel that
way, and I hope that
you'll eventually feel
better about leaving"** [or

whatever the complaint]

is enough to indicate that you are
listening, but that you are not
changing your mind.

- Serious questions from preteens
and teens deserve respectful
answers. Questions on topics like
evolution, politics, and ethical
questions—although posed in
group-related terms—can be
openings for meaningful discussion.

**"It's true that in [the
group] we thought we
were unique and better.
Now that you're
associating with all sorts
of other people, what do
you think about that?"**

Even if children are happy to leave, they
may have trouble shaking off beliefs that
the mainstream world is evil, and they
are doomed for leaving the group. A
truthful response could be something like

**"I used to think that, but
I don't any more. Here**

**we are, we've been
gone (however many)
days or weeks, and"**

[your choice of]

**"nothing awful has
happened to us,"**

or

**"we've met many kind
people."**

(or other objective information that contradicts the notions of evil and doom).

Sometimes it doesn't hurt simply to remind children that you are the parent—an adult with more knowledge and experience than they—and that you have decided that it's best for both you and them to be where you now are.

Adjustment issues for children

Leaving the group means a major adjustment for everyone. Children are generally attached to their usual places and routines and may feel changes keenly. Even if they are happy to leave, children need time to work through such issues as

- Learning their way in a strange new culture where things that were usual and customary are now "odd" or "weird," and things that were forbidden are now OK. If they have been taught that females

don't wear pants, for instance, girls may resist wearing jeans, but be teased for wearing the long skirts they are comfortable with.

- Their concern about your stress and turmoil—which they are likely to pick up. If a child hears you express worry about how you will feed the family, he may fear that he is in danger of starving, or perhaps abandonment.
- Loss of friends still in the group, who now shun them. This may be particularly painful if you still live in your old neighborhood and your children often find themselves ignored by people they've known all their lives.
- Making new friends and learning new activities. A boy taught that "outsiders" are "lost" or "inferior" may worry about playing with such "lost" or "inferior" children in his school.
- In many cases, the loss of a parent.
- Connecting with relatives that they may know marginally or not at all. They may have heard these same relatives described as "devilish" or "polluting."

Will your children be confused? Probably. Will they be angry? Quite possibly. Will they beg to go back? They may, depending on their experiences in the group and in their new world. Even if

they were mistreated in the group, even if they hated it, there may be times when the demands of their new life overwhelm them and it seems easier just to go back.

Age makes a big difference.

- Babies and toddlers will notice changes in routine and may pick up on tensions and upsets from you and their siblings. Lacking words to express their unease, they may show it through tantrums, sleeplessness, or fussing over food.
- Elementary school-aged children who have been indoctrinated into beliefs about the wickedness and dangers of the outside world may worry about some terrible evil coming upon them.
- Adolescents may be the same, or, at the other extreme, may be delighted to be out, and may have difficulty regulating their behavior in a world with many more choices than they are used to.

To the extent that you can get children to acknowledge and share their feelings and worries, it will help them to calm down, even though they disapprove of what is happening.

It never hurts to accept their feelings:

“I understand that you

are very worried about going to Hell [or ending the world's chance for peace, or losing enlightenment]. I used to think that way myself, but now it makes more sense to me to think about taking care of all of us right now, today. That's the best way I know to make myself a good person."

Children tend to follow their parents' example. If a parent is upbeat and presents the move as a good thing, although she acknowledges the difficulties, it will help children to focus on adjusting instead of lamenting.

"Yes, it's hard for us all; but I'm really happy that now I can be with you so much more and don't have to ask permission to get you what you need."

Of course you can't be upbeat all the time, and your children will probably sense when you're feeling overwhelmed or sad. It will help during those times to acknowledge your feelings, but not in a way that will frighten them. If you don't

share information about your mood, they are likely to see that you're agitated, but they may draw the wrong conclusion about why:

- They may imagine overly scary reasons why you are feeling this way, or
- think that it's wrong to acknowledge "negative" feelings, or
- even that it's somehow their fault.

When you acknowledge your own feelings, you show children both that it's OK to have sad or angry feelings, and that it helps to be appropriately open about them. Try for an honest, but reassuring explanation:

**"Yes, I am sad.
Sometimes it's so hard
to figure out how to do
the things I need to do
every day. But I know
I'll get through it,
because I always do."**

**"I'm angry, but not at
you. I'm just frustrated
because I keep trying to
get us a nicer place to
live, and I keep running
into delays. Let's think
of something to do that
will help me get my
mind off it."**

The younger the child, the simpler the explanation, the better, right down to

“Yes, I’m sad. I think a hug might cheer me up, though.”

Moving

For many, leaving the group means moving to a different part of town, a different part of the country, or even a different country. No matter how good the reasons or how positive the ultimate outcome, in addition to the dilemmas listed above, a move adds losses for all children:

- Loss of teachers and the need to accommodate to a new school and teachers
- Loss of neighborhood and the need to learn about a new neighborhood
- Loss of a home and the need to accustom themselves to a new home
- Loss of social competence; not knowing appropriate from inappropriate interactions, threatening from nonthreatening behaviors, gender roles, and so on

Social pressures

Children are keen observers and will quickly become aware of differences between themselves and others.

- They may note that other children have more, or more expensive, clothes and toys. Adolescents and pre-adolescents in particular will feel a strong need to match their classmates' possessions.
- They may see other children engaging in activities you are uncomfortable with and press you to allow them to join those activities.
- They may exploit a parent's desire to make up for any deprivations they experienced in the group, and may believe their own protestations that if only they could have the same expensive clothes or fancy gadgets as their peers, they would be happy.
- They may become keenly aware of their disconnect from their peers' culture: religious and secular holidays, birthdays, icons in music, TV, sports, and so on. This divide can create great pressure to fit in and cause clashes with a parent uncomfortable with these trends.

In deciding what to buy for your children or what activities to let them participate in, try not to let these pressures affect your decision, which will be better based if you are mindful of the

- suitability and
- affordability

of the desired items (in considering

affordability, it's important to figure in any operating costs of such gadgets as cell phones and iPods); and

- your own comfort level about the issues in question.

Helping children adjust

Children may express their stress and confusion by misbehaving. Sometimes they are selective about it: They may be angels at school and imps at home—or the opposite, problem kids at school and wondrous at home, or difficult in every setting. You can help them by offering support and structure.

Support

Busy as you are, try to find time for a real conversation with each child two or three times a week. Talk about what good things have happened and what was bad. It's nice if you can do something about the "bad," and surprisingly often, you can.

- But even if all you can do is say, **"That's too bad,"** or **"I'm sorry you hurt yourself,"** helping children express themselves and showing that you care will make a difference.
- If they're lonely for friends or family left behind in the group, let them know that's OK, and (if true) that you also miss people left

behind.

- As children make new friends, it's important to find a way to meet the new friends and their parents. This is not just a nicety. You need to know who's befriending your children.
- If there's a practical dilemma about your child wanting some toy or item of clothing that "everyone else has," give an honest answer, even if it's negative, whether it's **"I can't take on responsibility for a kitten until we're better settled,"** or **"We just can't afford that right now."**

Structure

Establishing rules and a routine as quickly as you can helps children understand what you expect of them and know what will happen next. Clear, consistent rules help keep your family safe and healthy, help them get along with each other, and encourage behaviors you want them to learn.

- Depending on a child's age, rules can be broad or specific: **"Be respectful of other people and their property,"** or **"We don't hit people, and we don't take their things."**
- Rules work best when they are
 - realistic: **"Apologize if**

you've hurt someone's

feelings" is more useful than

"Never hurt anyone's
feelings."

and

- practical: **"If you don't like your dinner, you can fix yourself a peanut butter sandwich"** makes more sense than "If you don't like this dinner, you can go without." (You probably don't want the child either to go hungry to bed or to sneak food.)
- Rules—like bedtimes—change as children grow and become more mature. Children can understand that
 - while it's OK for a 1-year-old to throw his ice-cream on the floor, it's not OK for a 5 year-old;

and that

 - although a 10-year-old is not allowed to be home alone without supervision, that's OK for a 12-year-old.
- Needless to say, children will notice if you don't abide by your own rules.

Routines will differ depending on your children's ages, needs, and personalities; but it is reassuring for children to know what's happening next and to be prepared for it. Usually, children's routines include

- A regular schedule for when they get up, eat breakfast, and get off to school on time every morning.
- An after-school routine with time for snack, homework, hobbies, friends, and household chores (not necessarily all on the same day).
- If possible, dinner at a regular time each night, although this may be quite difficult to achieve, depending on everyone's schedule.
- An adequate night's sleep. (For information about the importance of sleep, see [sleep](#).)
 - You can find [detailed information](#) about how much sleep is recommended for children of different ages.
 - A bedtime routine may take from 15 minutes to 30 minutes, including relaxing—not stimulating—talk or activities, a bath or shower, time to organize clothes and books for the next day, and time to read or listen to music that calms and relaxes—not suspenseful adventures, thumping rock

beats, or TV.

- Children who have experienced trauma or severe anxiety may need to sleep with a light on.
- Any child may need a comfort item like a beloved blanket or stuffed animal.

There will be changes in the routine as children get involved in after-school activities, and exceptions for special occasions. Weekends and holidays usually provide a welcome break from the “up-and-at-`em” demands of school days, but a few anchor events, such as a special Sunday morning breakfast or a regular Saturday family outing, are almost always treasured parts of the weekend break.

Discipline

The point of discipline is not to punish children for disobeying, but to get them to do what they are supposed to do.

- Once you have set the rules, it’s essential to enforce them fairly. There may be children who don’t challenge the rules from time to time, but most parents are familiar with that quizzical look that says, “Does he really mean it?”
- You may feel guilt and compassion for a child who was neglected or abused in a cult, but all children

need to understand that the rules apply to them.

There are many theories about how best to discipline your child. You can find some helpful tips and good ideas based on current research about instilling discipline from [Department of Health and Human Services](#). Another useful site is [childparenting.com](#).

Some parents feel the need for spiritual or religious guidance in disciplining their children. For suggestions about how to find this, see [Religion and Spirituality](#).

Getting help for children

After you leave the group, your children may have immediate practical needs. There are a number of social services that can help you with these needs, including

- [food resources](#) to help feed your children;
- [Medicaid](#) or [Children's Health Insurance Program](#) for their health care;
- [housing assistance](#); and
- [finding a job](#).

These services will help to keep you going, even though you may need much more.

The basic program for families with children is the federally sponsored Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

(TANF).

- TANF is a comprehensive program that signs you up for all the services for which you're eligible— food stamps, health care, and employment assistance, as well as housing and financial assistance.
- The program works through the individual states. [Here is contact information](#) for your state.
- By calling the contact number, you should be able to find out where the nearest public assistance office is, when it is open, how to make an appointment, and what [documents](#) you need to take with you to apply.

Enrolling for benefits

Enrolling for benefits may be a trying process. Public assistance agencies throughout the country tend to be inadequately funded. Overworked, sometimes poorly trained workers; rundown offices; outdated technology; and essential but irritating procedures may make an uncomfortable process even more trying. Don't be surprised by long waits in crowded offices, delays, lost documents, and other annoyances. You can save yourself some frustration and move things along a bit faster if you

- Phone ahead for an appointment, if possible.
- Find out what [documents](#) you need

to bring with you and have them ready.

- Keep a copy of your application.
- Submit copies, rather than originals, of key documents such as birth certificates whenever possible. If you must submit an original of a key document, get a receipt that shows
 - the document,
 - the date you submitted it,
 - the agency's name and address, and
 - the name of the person who took the document.
- Don't take brusque answers personally. Sometimes the worker is just as frustrated as you are, is feeling pressured by the volume of work, or may just have a headache.
- Focus on doing what's necessary to move your application to the next step.

Also keep in mind that

- You may have wide-ranging needs that the service is not set up for. Even with all the good will in the world, there may be a long wait for public housing that accommodates a family with an unusually large number of children, for example.
- The maximum expense allowance tends to be minimal; and if a family

needs everything from clothes to pots to furniture, it may not be enough.

Emergency help

Emergency help is available. If you need immediate assistance you may be eligible for emergency resources, such as

- [Emergency food stamps](#), a temporary service that can be activated in a few days. [Contact the nearest office](#) to apply.
- Local private charities that will give you food, clothing, or even small amounts of cash to tide you over.
- [Emergency shelters](#), available in most urban and suburban areas, which take in families and help you apply for various other forms of assistance such as food stamps or medical care. There may be problems getting into a shelter:
 - It may be full, with a long waiting list.
 - You may have more children than it can accommodate.

Or

- There may be some other hitch.
- If you are a victim of domestic violence, you might contact a local [domestic violence shelter](#).

- This option will give you more protection if you think the offender might be looking for you with intent to harm you or to take your children.
- Shelter workers will also help you with some of the legal issues, as well as the usual applications for social services.

School and Educational Issues

Children need and usually want to be in school. Getting them enrolled is an important step toward stabilizing their new life. Furthermore, children of school age (which may differ from state to state) are legally required to be enrolled in school. If you are home-schooling children, remember to check the state requirements, which are different in every state. [You can check your state's laws.](#)

Enrolling children in school

There are thousands of public school districts across the country, each with its own requirements and procedures. To learn about your local public schools, google your town or city, plus "public schools."

- Public schools are free to local residents.
- Many, if not all, public school

districts have systems for enrolling homeless children. Even if you have no permanent address, you can get your children into school.

- There are also thousands of private schools, which charge tuition for their students.
 - Each school has its own rules.
 - You can get information about admission requirements, costs, and financial aid from the school itself.

To enroll a child in public school, you will need

- Proof of age—[birth certificate](#), [passport](#), hospital or physician's certificate, or other document acceptable to the state where you live
- Proof of residence—ranges from a property tax bill or signed lease to special forms for those who share housing or are homeless
- [Immunization](#) certificates

Some school districts or private schools may also require additional documents, such as

- Documentation of a recent physical examination
- Report cards if the child was previously enrolled in a different

school

- Documentation of your relationship to the child, or legal [custody](#)
- Documentation regarding a child's physical problems or other special needs

Adjusting to a new school

Schools differ widely in the ways they function.

- Some go out of their way to help new students acclimatize, while others show them to a classroom and send them in.
- Some invite and welcome parent participation, while others limit parental participation to an occasional bulletin.
- In some schools, student turnover is high and students are used to welcoming new students. In others, newcomers are a rarity and face a closed group of those who've always been together.

Entering school in the middle of the school year is likely to make children's adjustment more difficult.

You can ease the transition when you enroll a child if you find out ahead of time about

- Dress code—Some public schools require uniforms. Others have guidelines like "no blue jeans" or "girls must wear skirts"; others

simply ask for “appropriate”
clothing (whatever that is!).

- Breaks and recesses—It may help children to sit still and pay attention if they know when the next opportunity will be to run around, go to the restroom, or grab a quick snack.
- Lunch times—Some schools have staggered luncheon shifts, with some children eating either unusually early or unusually late.
 - You may want to provide a snack to fill in the gap between breakfast and a late lunch, or between a very early lunch and dinner time at home.
 - If you are facing financial hardship, you can check whether your children are eligible for free breakfast or lunch at school.
- Supplies and equipment—Although public schools are “free,” parents may be expected to provide supplies such as backpacks, notebooks, rulers, crayons, and scissors; these items can add up to a costly total, especially when multiplied by the number of children you must equip.
- Teacher’s name—both pronunciation and spelling—and classroom location for younger

students.

Giving your children as much information as you can get about their new school will help avert some of their awkwardness and embarrassment in trying to fit into a new place.

Your children's teachers

It's a good idea to meet with your children's key teachers during the first week or two at the new school.

- Meeting with a teacher early on shows respect for the teacher and underlines your interest in the child's well-being.
- Such a meeting lays the groundwork for a positive relationship should a problem arise in the future.
- If you have middle-school- or high-school-age children who have several different teachers, you can focus on one or two key teachers, especially those who teach subjects the children are likely to need help with.
- Children who have left cults or other isolated groups may have gaps in their education that surprise or puzzle their teachers.
 - There is no need to use the word *cult* in discussing this situation with a teacher.
 - You can simply explain that

until recently, the child has been in a school with a very limited curriculum, and that is why you have changed schools.

- Although most teachers are sincerely interested in helping their students learn, there's always the risk of running into a teacher who, for whatever reason, can't or won't work with your child or you.
 - Always try to work with the teacher first, but don't feel you need to stop there.
 - If you have tried without success to get a teacher's cooperation, you can go to a school social worker, counselor, or the principal.

Security for school-aged children

A safety plan will ensure that your children know what to do in an emergency.

- All school-age children need to know your and their full name and address, and a phone number where they can reach you.
- Children need to know what to do if a stranger approaches them or offers them a gift or a treat.
- Children need to know
 - Who it's OK to leave school

with, and

- What to do if someone not OK tries to take them out of school.
- If you are the custodial parent in a [custody](#) battle, the school needs to know whether it's OK for the noncustodial parent to take a child from school.
- A child with an allergy, asthma, or other medical problem that may strike suddenly needs to know how to recognize the onset, and what to do about it. The school will need written instructions and authorizations, especially if medication is necessary.
- The school will also need to know if alternative medical approaches are your preference.



Children Left Behind

Sometimes a parent leaving a cult or high-demand group must leave children behind, whether because the children are not available to them, or because of health or other problems that make it impossible for the parent to care for the children immediately upon departure. In some instances, cults may hide children from the “apostate” parent.

If you face obstructions communicating with or visiting your children, it's important to seek [legal advice](#)—whether or not you plan eventually to try to

reunite with them.

If you are in this situation, it is critically important to do everything you can to let your children know you love them, and that you miss them.

Call your children, write to them, and, if at all possible, visit them regularly.

- Group members will probably cast your departure in a negative light, perhaps suggesting you abandoned your children.
- It will be hard for children in these circumstances to understand that you are doing your best to be a responsible parent, that you are trying to make a home where you can take care of them, or that your circumstances make it impossible to have them with you.

Your cards, letters, and packages may

- Be withheld, so that the children don't know you are trying to reach them. If you suspect this is happening, send mail with a request for [delivery confirmation](#) or [return receipt](#).
- Be rejected and returned. You can keep these things to show your children (and perhaps a judge) later on how hard you tried to stay in touch. Maintain a shoebox or file

for each child that contains all correspondence, sent items that are returned, and other evidence of your attempts to reach them.

Phone calls may get through. Your lawyer may be able to help with this, or you may be able to find a friend or relative still in the group who is willing to serve as intermediary. If so, you can arrange to call at a time you know the children will be with that person.

If you cannot get visits any other way, the court will probably order them. If the other parent is still in the group and alleges that you are in some way dangerous to the children, the court may order a supervised visit, in the presence of a social worker.

Your case for access to the children and perhaps eventual custody will be stronger if you can document your continuing efforts to talk to and visit the children, as well as any obstructions placed in your path by those in the group. Documents can be

- letters and postcards, including copies of items both sent and received;
- emails and faxes going both ways;
- telephone records showing dates and numbers called;
- postal records, such as return receipts;
- legally obtained tapings of phone calls and face-to-face encounters;

or

- other evidence that objectively supports your claim that you are trying to stay connected with your children and involved in their lives.
- former-member depositions regarding group procedures in handling/dealing with parents who are now outside the group.
- group teachings that describe how to deal with “apostates” or that advise abusive parenting procedures.



Custody Issues

Custody is the legal right to make decisions on a child’s behalf, including the child’s residence, schooling, and medical care. If one parent has left the group while the other parent stays, there may be conflict about how—and where—to raise the children. Parents may challenge each other’s right to make or share decisions for the children and endeavor to gain sole custody.

In these cases, the courts become involved and a judge makes the final decision, based on the children’s “best interest.” This somewhat foggy concept leaves a great deal to the judge’s perception:

- Is it in a child’s best interest to live in a close-knit, if isolated and eccentric, community with bizarre

beliefs, where he or she has always lived, and where it appears that he will always have a home and supportive community members?

Or

- Or is it in the child's best interest to be removed from that community and be brought up in mainstream society, perhaps with an inferior support system?

Judges in custody cases are used to conflict. Judges are accustomed to hearing parents' claims that an opposing parent is an unfit custodian and a judge may

- Doubt claims about the the negative nature of life in the group to which a parent belongs.
- Have an inherent belief that both sides are always partly to blame.
- Need strong reasons to deny a parent's right to joint custody.
- Fixate on "freedom of religion" or "freedom of speech" issues rather than destructive or dangerous behavior.

Depending on a child's age, a judge may or may not take the child's preference into consideration.

Group publications urging members to break connections with those who leave, discouraging medical care or higher levels of education for children, or asserting the leadership's supremacy over civil authorities will help the court to understand the issues.

Laws about custody differ from state to state; but in any state, you will need expert legal help to settle any custody questions. You can find an [overview of custody issues and legal information about the laws in each state.](#)

While custody disputes may be long and drawn-out, some states offer the possibility of temporary emergency custody if a child, his sibling, or you, the parent, are in danger. You will need a lawyer for this, also.

If you cannot afford a lawyer, you can look for free or low-cost legal help at

- a site maintained by the [American Bar Association](#),

or at

- the Web site of the [Legal Services Corporation](#), an organization that funds legal services nationwide.
- If you are in an emergency shelter or in touch with an organization that helps survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault, you may

be able to find legal help through one of these resources.

Children in a Custody Battle

Children in a custody battle will be hurt if their parents use them as weapons. Try not to draw them in.

- Keep your explanations as simple and neutral as possible: **“Mommy and Daddy are not together anymore, and we are working with a judge to arrange things.”**
- Children may feel themselves responsible for the breakup and may even try to reunite their parents.
- Urging allegiance to one parent over the other, or using children as spies on the other parent’s behavior and activities is likely to backfire. Children may
 - begin to see themselves as powerful arbiters who can sell or blackmail parents at will;
 - or*
 - become unduly fearful as they perceive parents—their protectors—turning to them for protection.

Although there is no need for false reassurances (“Your father is a fine man, he didn’t really mean to hurt you”), there

is no need to attack or demonize the person who contributed half a child's genes.

- If a parent has abused the children, or if they have seen a parent abuse you, they will know why you are seeking custody.
- If the children have not seen or did not understand the harm, you can avoid sharing those details. A simple **"This is between your mother and me, and you don't need to know anything more"** is all the answer required.

In some instances, cults systematically abuse children. The [Abuse and Neglect](#) section has information about what constitutes abuse and different kinds of abuse.

- The parent outside the group needs to document such abuses.
 - Statements from former members,
 - teachings of their former group,
 - testimony of their children, and
 - physical evidence when it's available

are some of the ways you can show this. For more information about documenting abuse, see [Child Protective and Child Welfare Services](#).

- This documentation needs to be collected and presented to lawyers and law enforcement.

Visitation

In all but the most unusual cases, the court will order that the children visit the parent they are not living with.

- If a parent is accused of abusing or neglecting the child, the court may order “supervised visitation,” which requires a child protection worker to be present during the visit.
- Ordinarily, visits are arranged so that they do not interfere with school.
- Limits, including the duration and location of the visit, are clearly set.
- If possible, the parents’ lawyers should discuss visitation and agree on a plan that they present to the judge.
- Once the judge has set a visitation plan, both parents need to follow it carefully, even if it’s emotionally taxing to hand children over to someone you think may try to turn them against you.
- If you fear a destructive outburst from the other parent during a handover, you can protect yourself by having a friend or neighbor present, who can confirm any

report of misbehavior.

- If you want to keep your address private, arrange for the handover to take place elsewhere, like a shopping mall or restaurant.
- You will be expected to report violations of the visitation plan, such as the other parent keeping the children long past the appointed time, or taking them out of the state, to your lawyer, or, if directed, to the court.
- It's generally not a good idea to ask children about details of life with the other parent, but unsolicited accounts of abuse or neglect do need to be reported. Signs of physical abuse should be immediately assessed by a doctor and reported if confirmed.

Keep a written record of visits, including postponements, appointments not kept, and visiting opportunities not used.

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