

## The Summertime Parent

By Ron Huxley, MFT

While most children were anxiously waiting for the school year to end, Jonathan was simply anxious. Although most boys loved traveling across the country during vacation, Jonathan dreaded the annual trek to see his father. It wasn't that he didn't love his father or enjoy being with him. It was the children from his father's new marriage that he didn't like. He felt like he was no longer his father's son and that his dad loved them more than him. To top it off, he wouldn't get to see his friends or his mother for almost ten weeks.

Jonathan's parents had divorced, and his father had moved to another state. He only saw his father during Christmas and summer vacations. His father would send birthday cards and occasional letters, and with the invention of email, he could type off a quick note anytime he or his dad wanted. But that didn't make the situation easier for him. In some ways, it only made a hard situation harder.

It was no summer picnic for Jonathan's father either. Instead of feeling excitement about seeing his son, he felt anger and resentment that was often channeled toward his ex-wife whom he blamed for the custody arrangements. "I never realized how hard divorce could be," exclaimed Jonathan's father, "and getting remarried has only made it worse. Now I am stuck in the middle of two sets of frustrated families."

### Wounds of Divorce

Regardless of the reasons, divorce hurts! Any separation between two connected people will cause emotional wounds when pulled apart. Like any wound, the traumatized area must be cleaned and cared for if healing is going to be possible. The more dirt slung between divorced parents, through verbal and physical fights or nasty legal battles, the more infection in the relationship between parent and child will develop.

Jonathan's father moved across the country because of a great job offer...or at least, that was what he told everyone. The job was great, but the real reason was that he couldn't get along with Jonathan's mother and just needed to leave and start over again. Unfortunately, that left Jonathan behind.

"In retrospect, I would have stayed, regardless of the situation," admits Jonathan's father. "At the time, the hurt was too much to stand. I didn't want the divorce, and his mother's new boyfriend was just salt in the wound. Rather than continue to argue and waste money on lawyers, I decided to leave."

Parents who have a long-distance relationship must address the wounds of divorce. Cleaning out a wound is painful but necessary. Similarly, letting go of old hurts and memories is important for healing and growth. Jonathan relates that his first summer with his dad in his new home was fun: "We went out to eat, the movies, miniature golf, and then my dad started pumping me for information on my mom and her boyfriend, when I just wanted to be with my dad."

When parents do not deal with their own issues, children suffer all over again and their wounds are not allowed to heal. "Summer time parents" need to take care of themselves throughout the entire year so that they can enjoy the time with their children. Parents can care for themselves by consulting with a professional, developing a strong network of friends, exercising regularly and eating right.

## **Reassurances and Permissions**

Major changes are frightening to young children. The loss of a parent creates fears of loss of food and shelter, being forgotten, attacked, punished, or unloved. While this might seem irrational to a parent, it is a real concern for the child. Children need reassurances that these things will continue to be in their lives and, most importantly, that they are loved. Don't make promises that things will go back to the way they were or be just as good. That is one promise parents can't deliver, and it breaks down a child's trust. Simply offer a verbal hug of hopefulness that the future will be secure and safe. In addition to reassurance, children often need permission to let go of the guilt that attaches itself to living with the "school-year" parent and visiting the summer parent. Both parents need to tell the child that it is okay that he/she are going. Be honest about missing the child but save the wailing and cloth-ripping for another time and place.

Permission giving helps to untangle the loyalty binds that children get caught in after divorce. Don't ask a lot of questions about the other parent and his/her life back home. If the child wants to talk, fine, but don't start an investigation and definitely keep your opinion of the other parents life to yourself. Children feel they are disloyal to one parent by staying with and loving another parent. This problem is rooted in the concrete thinking styles of school-aged children. It is a developmental issue that can't be exorcised and must be adjusted to.

## **Creative Communication**

The key to being a successful summer parent is to have regular communication during the other months of the year. Because it is difficult for the parent who moves away to watch the child grow up, predictable and consistent communication in the form of phone calls, letters, postcards, e-mails, photos, and tape recordings can help. Too many parents spend their time on the phone or in letters mourning the time they are apart or how much they miss the child. This retraumatizes the child and makes the parent look pathetic. If it has to be said, say it one time and move on. Focus the discourse on what is going on in your and your child's life. Make plans for the upcoming visit and discuss emotional issues important to the child. Stay away from morbid meanderings.

Make the communications short and newsworthy. A one page letter talking about how the dog ate your favorite shoe or describing a beautiful sunset will make a better connection between parent and child than a long, boring letter that lists every detail of the week. E-mail is also a great way to communicate as the medium itself is geared toward brief, informal notes, and the instantaneous nature of the format makes frequent communication practical.

Try alternative mediums. If the parent or the child is not a "letter writer," try using a tape recording. Buy a compact recorder and walk around for a day recording various activities and thoughts. Capture the sounds of the dog eating your shoe or describe the sunset as you look out the back window. Buy a Polaroid camera and take pictures of the new house and neighborhood and send those (by e-mail or snail mail) to the child. Alternative forms of communication can add a little more color and life to dry words on paper and bring the child and parent closer together emotionally.

If you like creative ideas, do a project or play a game across the time zones. Read a sport article or watch a favorite television program and then discuss it later on the phone or by e-mail. Keep separate journals that are exchanged during the visits.

Create an online web page with both parent and child as co-webmasters. Play a game of checkers (with two sets) and give the moves to each other during your communications. Make up a "sharing box" where you put mementos and little treasures for the other person to look at and discuss when together. Start a garden or acquire an aquarium and get advice on what to plant and how to care for the fish from the other person. Creative ideas, such as these, foster family solidarity despite time and place. It makes the relationship feel real and alive and that is important to parent and child.

## **School Connections**

Summer parents feel out of touch when it comes to the child's life at school. Request to be put on the school's mailing list or give the child's teacher an e-mail address to update the distant parent on activities and progress. Many schools and teachers have web sites set up so parents can view their child's itinerary and grades. Knowing what is going on at the child's school allows parents to ask intelligent questions about upcoming field trips and school projects. The child will also feel that the parent cares about him or her. Parents can make similar connections with doctors, therapists, and coaches.

Jonathan and his father still miss each other, but their relationship has blossomed despite the distance. They are routing for the same baseball team and are working on a go-cart that Jonathan and his new siblings will race during the summer at a track near the father's house. "I started taking pictures of the engine as I dismantled it and I scan and send them out each week by e-mail to Jonathan. He told me last night that he has started a scrapbook with all the pictures in them. When he gets here, the go-cart should be all put together, and we can paint it together," explains his father.

Geography doesn't have to separate parents and children emotionally. Summer-time parents can keep the relationship alive during the school year so that they look forward to being together and can pick up where they left off. "Jonathan has excitement in his voice when we talk about our time together. That is the biggest gift I could ever receive!"

### **About the Author**

Ron Huxley is the founder of the <http://www.ParentingToolbox.com> and <http://www.AngerToolbox.com> websites. Join his free newsletter at <http://www.parentingtoolbox.com/join.html> for more great parenting tools or become a member of the Parenting Toolbox and get hundreds of parenting tools to improve your relationship with your child at <http://www.parentingtoolbox.com>.