

## **Working with Divorced Parents: *A Nanny's Prospective***

Kellie Geres, a veteran nanny with 20 years experience, lives in Potomac, Maryland.

For the past ten years I have worked for three sets of divorced parents and as the child care provider in these situations it is my job to make the situation as stress free as possible for the child/children and assure them that they can count on me to be there for them. It is also my job to communicate to the parents the issues I see the children having that are due to the changed family dynamic. These may be emotional, behavioral, social or developmental.

I also wear the hat of household manager, overseeing the day-to-day running of two busy households. If the parents and the nanny all work together on setting up communication and action plans the situation can become a win-win for all, despite the trauma of divorce.

### **A MESSAGE TO PARENTS**

Communicate daily. In my current position we rely primarily on email communication throughout the day, but I speak with at least one parent personally each day.

- Email allows me to communicate with both parents simultaneously so they both know what is going on: schedule reminders, concerns, school updates, doctor/dentist appointment reminders, etc.
- A household log works well and can be as simple as a spiral bound notebook left on the kitchen counter in each home for the nanny to write about the children's day and observations.
- Weekly updates on Friday on how the week went, reminders for the upcoming week, things I want the parents to pay attention to over the weekend, needs of each household, etc.

One of the best tools for a nanny is a BlackBerry. It helps nanny and parent to be in quick communication with one another. For example:

- I can email the parents to let them know that when I picked up the kids I learned that they have a project due or a test the next day.
- Dad may be in a meeting and Mom may be traveling when I receive a call from the school that one of the children is sick and needs to come home. I can email the parents to let them know what's going on.
- I've even emailed "*call me immediately*" when necessary and get a faster response than had I called and left a voice mail.

Parents, check your attitude at the door.

- Children pick up changes in mood, stress levels, and attitudes of the adults in their life.
- Don't demean, call names, or belittle your ex in the presence of the children, and advise friends and family to follow this rule as well.
- Put your egos aside and communicate directly with your ex-partner regarding the needs of the children and the households.
- Don't ask your nanny to tell your ex that you can't take the kids on your scheduled weekend. You need to discuss situations like this directly.
- You may enjoy a close relationship with your nanny, but be careful not to cross the line between friend/confidant and employer. The nanny is there in the best interest of the child/children.
- Parents, please don't divulge personal information about your ex to your children or nanny in hopes of winning their love or making them choose sides – that's like asking which parent they love more.

Parents, clearly define your work agreement with your nanny. In the case of working for divorced parents this is even more important, since the nanny has two employers. Make sure that all parties are clear on the terms of the contract. For example, if the children are away with one parent on vacation, does that mean the nanny has paid vacation time? If one parent comes home later than the other parent, does the nanny get paid a higher salary for the time that she works for that parent? How will daily expenses be handled?

Keeping Track of the Money for Both Parties. Another matter of importance is household and child related expenses. Initially when I started my job five years ago, I had one credit card for all purchases. I would submit expenses by category – mom/dad/children/auto. The parents finally realized this wasn't working as well for them, so now I have a credit card for each parent/household and one for children's purchases and auto – gas, maintenance, etc. This way, each parent is responsible for their own purchases, and shared costs - children and auto - are split. I am an authorized user on these accounts; I bare no financial responsibility, which should be clearly defined in the work agreement. This makes my life, and the parents' lives, so much easier and organized.

## **A MESSAGE TO NANNIES**

If you are a nanny working for divorced parents with shared custody.

- You must be able to multi-task
- You must be extremely flexible when it comes to last minute schedule changes.
- You must be a great communicator – bringing attention to any concerns you have relating to the children or anything that affects your ability to do your job.
- You must take initiative. See something that needs to be done? Bring it to the attention of the parent and either offer to take care of it, find someone to get it done or suggest a possible solution. The parents will thank you for your help and interest and they will appreciate your attention to details.

Nannies, children feel more comfortable and secure with consistency. Here is how I handle the organization of our household.

- Mom gives me the custody schedule and I fill in each date with the parent's initial on a spiral calendar so the children and parents are always aware of where the kids will be on any given day. Once I have filled in the month's schedule I have it copied for each household.
- I try to prepare calendars three months in advance in case we need to make plans for something that is coming up in the future. The calendar can always be edited if dates need to be changed.
- The children benefit from having their own calendars in their room. We use simple dry-erase calendar boards. The youngest child likes to do her own, decorating it and filling in special things she has going on – sleepover at a friend's, movie release date, shopping trips, etc.
- When you have two households you need to enforce the same rules and have the same expectations in each. Keep dietary needs and basic wellness consistent. A nanny plays a key role in this and should speak up when she has concerns about one of the household's. It's in the children's best interest to let the other parent know if one parent is not maintaining certain standards of care.
- Be sure to have familiar objects that make the children comfortable in each home: favorite books, toys, even toiletries and medications. While it may seem extreme, and costly, to have duplicate sets of some items, it will save in the trauma of going from one place to the other every week. It is also helpful when those unexpected schedule changes pop up.
- If there is a last minute schedule change, the nanny needs to do everything she can to help the kids feel secure. Children don't like change and can react badly or become insecure when faced with sudden, unexpected changes.

- Be sure to explain why the change occurred: “Dad had a client emergency and wants to be with you, but felt it would be too late so you’re going to be with Mom tonight.”

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