

# Don't Be a Disneyland Dad

By Armin Brott

Non-custodial fathers -- especially those with fairly infrequent visitation -- often feel obligated to make every second of every visit with their children "count." Sometimes they're motivated by guilt, the fear of losing their children's love, trying to make up for lost time, a desire to compete with the ex, or something else. But whatever it is, the result is the same: they buy their kids extravagant gifts, eat out every meal, take them on expensive trips, give into their every whim, forget about discipline, and generally treat them like visiting royalty instead of children. It's no wonder that a lot of people refer to this kind of father as the "Disneyland Dad." Falling in to this trap is easy, but you won't be able to keep it up for very long: sooner or later you'll run out of money or ideas. And when that happens, your kids will have gotten so spoiled that they'll do one of two things (maybe even both): Resent you for not giving them "their due," or think you don't love them any more. Here are some simple steps you can take to keep yourself from turning into a Disneyland Dad:

- **Plan ahead.** Don't schedule every minute of every day, but over the course of the visit, try to allow some time in each of these areas: fun, food, private time for you with each child, and time for the kids to be by themselves. **Don't go overboard.** You do not have to amuse your children every second. Don't even try. There's no way you'll be able to keep up the pace. And if you get them used to non-stop entertainment, treats, and gifts, they'll resent the hell out of you if you break the pattern. **Don't try to make up for lost time -- you can't.** **Vary your activities.** Yes, as we know, kids love routines. But if you go the movies and the zoo every weekend, they'll be bored out of their minds. The weekend newspapers and those free, local parenting publications are full of great things to do in your area. Groups such as Parents without Partners often have activities planned that can help add some variety to your times with your children. **Treat your kids like they live there (they do), not like visiting VIPs.** This means giving them some chores and making sure they practice the violin and do their homework. It also means having -- and enforcing -- rules in your house. **Give them some choice in what to do.** Ask them to put together a list of possibilities or give them some options to choose from. You certainly don't have to do everything on their list. But the fact that you've asked for their input will reinforce the idea that you genuinely care about what's important to them. **Allow plenty of down time.** Some of your weekends are going to be packed to the gills with great activities. But don't make them all that way. Cramming too much fun into your times together can actually cause a lot of stress. Kids of all ages need to spend some time entertaining themselves -- even if it means being bored for a few hours. This can include writing in a journal, doing a crossword puzzle, drawing, or just hanging out in the living room listening to a CD. **Don't put too much pressure on yourself.** There are times when you'll have tons of energy to run around doing things all day and other times when you'll feel like a slug -- just like everyone else in the world. Your kids will understand. You and the kids will occasionally have fights, too. If you do fight, don't spend a lot of time worrying about it: they won't stop loving you. Fights are perfectly normal in intact families, and just as normal in broken ones.

- **Be normal.** Of course you'll try not to spend your times with your kids working on some project from the office. But sometimes something comes up that you just have to do. Say, for example, this is the only weekend you can take care of those household repairs. Having the kids help out --even if it's only holding one end of the tape measure or handing you nails -- is a wonderful way to spend time together and make them feel a part of your life. It'll also help them tone down any unrealistic expectations they might have about you by showing them that you're human and that you have obligations and responsibilities.

Your goal as a non-custodial father -- even if your time with your children is limited -- is to have as normal a relationship with them as possible. There's no need to compete with your ex and you don't need to buy their love. If you genuinely love your children and are interested in being with them, they'll know it. And they'll love you and want to be with you too.