

Disneyland Dad's (and Mom's)



By Robyn Sabes

Understanding the Divorced Parent's Guilt Trips and Guilt Traps

You may not even know that you're doing it. But it's harming your kids!

You're excited because it's your weekend with the kids. Maybe you'll go the movies and see the latest Disney film; Maybe you'll take them to the fair – that's always fun. And of course, a trip to the store is a must, followed by their favorite dinner. By the time the weekend concludes, the kids are tired and weighed down in souvenirs and gifts – evidence of the great time you had together. So what's wrong with that? Plenty.

Divorced parents who, perhaps because of the limited time spent with the kids, buy "little" gifts when there is no occasion, eat out most meals or allow the kids to dictate the menu, take the kids to expensive events, give into their whims, slide on discipline, and generally treat them like visiting royalty instead of children.

You may feel it's one of the most natural expressions of love for your child, but in reality, your actions are your own subconscious effort to minimize your feelings of guilt over the divorce – and no matter how well intentioned you are, it's selfish and it's hurting your kids.

It begins innocently with a few gifts purchased for the kids just because you love them. On the surface, this natural expression of giving to your child may seem harmless, but it actually places your relationship with your child at risk in several ways.

It's called the Disneyland Dad Syndrome and nearly all newly divorced dads and moms (those without physical custody) slip into it at first. The problem is that some never get over it. For these unlucky parents and their kids, it eventually strains the parent-child relationship. It also alters your child's beliefs and expectations about healthy relationships; affects their self-esteem and self-worth; causes them to associate "things" with love; and causes them to feel insecure and inferior.

Disneyland Dad (Mom) Syndrome's Harmful Effects

1. It creates the illusion that your relationship is based on 'things.' Kids will come to expect this same level of gifting and entertainment from the absent parent. They begin to associate gifts with love. When the gifts stop or lessen, they'll feel you've stopped loving them.

That's not a risk many parents would be willing to take. Are you?

2. It's an unsustainable situation. Sooner or later you'll run out of both money and ideas. It will exhaust you and you'll end up feeling like you've failed your kids . . . again.

3. It becomes progressively more harmful with age. If your behavior continues into your child's teen years, the request for specific gifts will eventually turn into demands. And when their demands aren't met, they act out in ways that are harmful to themselves. Why? Because they take your failure to meet their demands as a sign you don't love them. And no amount of talking will be able to convince them otherwise . . . only your purchases can.

4. Your children will ultimately mimic your behavior. You know how kids mimic everything they see? They're like sponges that soak up everything they come into contact with. You don't want your child growing to believe that all relationships are based on this approach. Only by demonstrating an emotionally healthy parenting style will you encourage your child's future parenting success.

5. Your children won't truly connect with you as a person. When your relationship is based on give, give, give (you) and take, take, take (your child) what are you teaching them about relationships? You're teaching him that the world owes him. If you frequently hear, "can you buy me _____?" then your child has stopped seeing you as a loving parent and more as a weekend ATM.

6. Your child won't feel at home with you. Treating your kids like visitors who are catered to, with no rules and no responsibilities doesn't allow them to feel like they have a place in your home. They aren't visitors. Establish rules and assign chores. Treat them like they live there!

Ways to Avoid Weekend Disneyland

Being a divorced parent has a great deal of internalized stress associated with it. There's a strong desire to make your children like you and want to spend time with you, especially if you only get to see them a few days a month.

Studies show that what kids remember growing up is not the extravagant birthday parties or the expensive vacations. It's the ongoing consistent time spent together that create memories and bonding experiences.

Here are 10 ways to avoid becoming a Disneyland Dad or Mom. By implementing these 10 simple skills, you will notice that your time with your children will be of better quality and will improve your relationship with them more than opening your wallet.

1. Be involved in your children's life. Be present to celebrate birthdays, significant events, and celebrations. Make it a point to attend their ball games, recitals, and school functions, even if it's not your "day," because it will make your

child's day. Know who their teachers, friends, and after school activities are, and stay involved with those as much as possible.

2. Promote good communication between you and your children. Employ an open door policy and allow your children to come to you whenever they need.

3. Be consistent. Make it a point to keep every promise. Whether it's as simple as I'll call you tomorrow at 5 or following through with the reward for their accomplishments, or discipline for this unacceptable behavior.

4. Implement natural consequences for misbehavior. When your child misbehaves, enforce natural consequences. Studies show that children respect and love parents who hold them accountable for their actions. Children want and need you to be a parent, not a friend.

5. Spend quality time with your children. Make it a point to clear off part of your schedule to spend one-on-one time with your children. Remember your children are coming to see you, not the great toys at your house.

6. Send heartfelt tokens of your love and affection. Send notes or cards to your children. Remind them that you are thinking about them and love them. This will also let them know that you are always there for them.

7. Never pass on your time with your children. Sometimes we get sidetracked by our busy lifestyles and are unable to see our children on visitation days. Spending time with your children is the only way you can genuinely show them that they are more important than anything else.

8. Ask your children what they want to

do with you on their visit. Incorporate your children's needs. Make this a mutual and respectful time together.

9. Don't burden your children. Burdening your children with thoughts and discussions of feelings towards your ex-spouse or about the financial conflicts associated with the divorce will only spoil the time that you have together.

10. Parent out of love not guilt. Being a loving parent requires consistency and holding your children accountable for their action and behaviors. Avoid decreasing consequences or adding rewards because you are feeling guilty.

Any parent who loves his/her children wants them to be happy and as unaffected by the divorce as possible. The guilt we feel because of our personal decisions can be almost unbearable. As a result, we often find ourselves doing almost anything to compensate for the pain we have caused. While we might believe that over-compensation is in some sense redemptive and healing, we can be easily deceived by ourselves and by the reactions of our kids. We do something, we see them smile, and so we kick into overkill believing we have found a way to erase their pain and our guilt. In the long run, these things will only cause them more pain – and you more guilt. In the end, if you must give your child something – give a hug.

About the Author

Robyn Sabes is a research writer and staff writer for Going Bonkers. Copyright Going Bonkers Magazine. All rights reserved.



Sometimes the majority only means that all the fools are on the same side.