

Center for Navigating Family Change

CO-PARENT TIP OF THE MONTH

In Georgia, the law is written so that if a 14-year-old child desires to live primarily with one parent in a divorce case, that desire is honored unless a judge can find a reason why that choice is not in his/her best interests. It's a little stickier if a 14-year-old declares he or she does not want to spend time with one of the parents – in essence, cutting their relationship off. I've heard that judges will honor that child's desire to not visit in some cases. This, of course, is the legal perspective.

However, as a mental health professional, I am compelled to balance those important legal rights with explaining to parents the emotional consequences for the child. For example, if a 14-year-old doesn't want to visit with a parent because it's boring there, or that parent is more strict, or they hate the apartment, or even because it's a difficult relationship, are any of these good reasons to allow a teen to quit a relationship with a parent? If the decision to not visit has to do with some sort of abuse, it needs to have a legal remedy, of course. However, I see too many cases in which a parent says, "My child doesn't want to visit the other parent, so why should I make him?"

Besides there being a court order, consider the problem with giving in to teenagers (who are selfish by nature) when they find something difficult or inconvenient. The teen years are the time when important life skills need to be learned – especially relationship skills. Teaching a teen to negotiate well, share honest feelings respectfully, and learn how to endure when things get a little tough, are necessary to prepare them for the adult world and future relationships of all types. Instead of giving in, find out what's really going on with your teen. See if you can help your child develop coping skills for what they are complaining about (what to do if they're bored, how to respond when things don't go well, how to ask for something different, etc.). If that doesn't work, engage a therapist who might be able to bridge the gap between the child and the other parent.

Don't let a teen quit a primary attachment relationship with a parent without doing some work to help them avoid the future pain of that. Even kids who reject their parents will often blame that parent later in life, and say they were abandoned because they feel their parent should have fought harder to make them visit. It can be a very difficult thing to repair in adulthood, so do everything possible to address the emotional consequences now, even when the legal rights are in your favor.

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