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LIFE & STYLE

For Divorced Parents, Coronavirus Means Extra Complication

Even exes who are amicably splitting custody of children don't always agree on how much risk they will tolerate



ILLUSTRATION: SONIA PULIDO

By Andrea Petersen

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Elizabeth Kanner has strict social distancing rules for her and her two children, ages 11 and 14. No playdates. No climbing on playground equipment. No socializing at all with anyone outside of the family.

But Ms. Kanner, who lives in Berkeley, Calif., shares custody of her children with her ex-husband, Jeff Till. While she says they generally see eye-to-eye on the rules, Ms. Kanner didn't agree with Mr. Till's plan to drive to Los Angeles to visit his girlfriend last weekend. Ms. Kanner was nervous about potential exposure to the virus, since Mr. Till's girlfriend has children of her own, an ex-husband and elderly parents who have hired caregivers who come and go from their home.

"My anxiety was through the roof," says Ms. Kanner, an environmental consultant. "The idea of creating a circle around your children and you and your ex is pretty hard. He could just trash any hard work I could do to

protect them and me.”

The coronavirus pandemic is causing stress and tumult in families around the world. Things can get even more complicated when parents are divorced or separated. Some former spouses disagree about what social distancing and stay-at-home directives mean.

Divorce lawyers and mediators say they’ve seen a few ex-partners move into the same home to keep the family quarantined together, which can create its own tension. Others are choosing to keep the children at one parent’s home for now. With job losses mounting, some parents are worried they won’t be able to pay—or won’t be receiving—their usual child-support payments.

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Mr. Till eventually decided not to travel to Los Angeles. “It was hard to give [the trip] up. The more I’ve learned about what’s going on, the more conservative I’ve become,” he says.

“My anxiety has dropped like a stone,” Ms. Kanner says.

Parents are being left to hammer out their differences largely without the help of the judicial system. Across the country, many family courts are

closed or only considering emergency cases, such as those involving domestic violence and restraining orders, says Susan Myres, president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers and a family lawyer in Houston. She notes that many jurisdictions require that existing custody agreements be followed even when schools are closed. (Families can get help from marriage and family therapists and professional mediators.)

Ms. Myres says she’s seeing a rise in fights over time with children, with some parents wanting more or even all of the time because of concerns about exposure to the virus in the other parent’s home. Others want less time so they can juggle working from home with child care.

Parents who don’t cooperate may use what happens during the pandemic to attack each other, says Matthew Sullivan, a mediator and parenting coordinator in Palo Alto, Calif., and the president of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.

He cites the case of one client whose ex-husband’s girlfriend had recently returned from overseas. The client wanted to know where the girlfriend had been visiting, if Covid-19 had been spreading there and if there was a quarantine in place. But her ex-husband refused to tell her. Dr. Sullivan notified the client’s ex-husband that their child wouldn’t be able to go to him until he gave his ex-wife the information she sought. (As a parenting coordinator assigned by the court, Dr. Sullivan has the authority to issue such directives.) The ex-husband complied.

“Down the road, the courts are going to open and there will be some accountability,” he says. “Enhancing risk and damaging your co-parenting relationship, those are things that are relevant to how the court views your parental status.”

Differing levels of concern about Covid-19 can cause conflict. “The biggest issue I see is when two parents disagree about the severity and the lethality of this coronavirus pandemic,” says Michele Weiner-Davis, a couples therapist in Boulder, Colo.

She advises families to defer to the perspective of the more anxious parent. “It is important for the less worried parent to help the more cautious parent feel safe,” she says. “It will be in their kid’s best interest if the more concerned parent can take a deep breath and relax and not have to worry 24/7 about what the kid is doing and where they’re going.”

Wendy Paris and David Callahan have been amicably divorced for five years. Their 12-year-old son, Alexander, splits his time between Ms. Paris and Mr. Callahan’s homes in Santa Monica, Calif. And the adults generally agree about the social distancing rules for Alexander: They let him play with three other boys in their neighborhood. “They’re part of our little germ pod,” Ms. Paris says.

Ms. Paris insists that the playdates happen outside only. “It seems if somebody’s child was exposed, there’s less of a risk if they are outside,” says Ms. Paris, who works as a writer and is the author of the book “Splitopia,” about divorcing on good terms. But on a recent day when Alexander was at his father’s house, Ms. Paris called Alexander and found out that he and his friend were inside playing Minecraft. When Alexander returned to her house, “I had him take a bath and put his clothes in the washer,” she says.

Mr. Callahan, who runs the digital media site Inside Philanthropy, says he was OK with the inside playdate at the time, but now agrees that the kids are better off getting together outside. “My feeling has been who knows how long this is going to go on. We need to balance the risk and a sustainable plan.”

Michael Aurit is president of the Academy of Professional Family Mediators and has a private mediation practice in Scottsdale, Ariz. He’s seen an uptick in requests from current clients to reconcile disputes related to Covid-19 around everything from how and when to home-school to whether or not to take the kids onto (potentially crowded) hiking trails. “The key is that it is not one parent dictating to the other the way it is going to be,” he says.

And if it is safer for the children to spend more time—or all of the time—at one parent’s house, agree that “there is going to be makeup time for this

other parent” later on, he says. Mr. Aurit also suggests a “FaceTime anytime” policy for parents who are losing time with their children.

Kym O’Neill, a massage therapist in Brooklyn, N.Y., usually splits custody of her two sons, ages 13 and 15, evenly with her ex-husband. But when New York ushered in a stay-at-home policy and with cases of Covid-19 skyrocketing, Ms. O’Neill asked her ex-husband for more time with the children to reduce how often they would have to travel back and forth between homes. “It doesn’t make sense to me to take that risk of jostling them back and forth given the possibility of them getting this and infecting others,” Ms. O’Neill says.

Her ex-husband agreed to the plan. Their children are now alternating nine days with Ms. O’Neill and five days with their father. “When you’re at home thinking about the end of the world and ruminating about how much money you’re losing, it’s very comforting to have my kids with me.”

Vanessa Bradden, a marriage and family therapist in Chicago, says she’s seen many of her divorced and separated clients who often have conflict “come together pretty nicely” during the crisis. “There’s just a feeling that we really need each other right now.”

Ms. Kanner in Berkeley says that the disagreement over Mr. Till’s Los Angeles trip aside, the former couple have been sharing health information and food and have been working together to make the situation easier on their children.

They’ve started splitting up the children so each has alone time with a parent. This helps reduce tension between the boys, who have no other social outlets. “They’ve been pretty good, but they’re about to kill each other,” she says.

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