

SHARING CUSTODY, DIPLOMATICALLY

A DIVORCE SETTLEMENT GAVE THESE FS CHILDREN TIME WITH BOTH PARENTS AND THE UNEXPECTED GIFT OF TRAVEL SKILLS.

BY VICTORIA HIRSCHLAND

Less than a year after my Foreign Service husband and I divorced, I had to put my babies on a plane to travel 18 hours to see him. Well, they weren't exactly babies, being 11 and 13 at the time, but they seemed so young as we hugged at the security gate.

The children and I had talked and packed, and I had tucked emergency lists away in their pockets. Then I took them to the airport, where strangers hung pouches around their necks and marched them through security.

I have escorted them to those gates for seven years now, always with some trepidation. Yet my sons have grown to be capable young men, adept at handling airports all over the world. Though divorce is not the way I would have given them this skill, watching these boys grow tall and strong and confident, ready to take their places in the world, has been a source of joy.

When my ex and I chose divorce, we also chose to minimize the pain of it for our sons. Our final divorce decree

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included a joint custody arrangement, even though we knew we would always live thousands of miles apart. Our older son, Richard, recently confirmed that this decision was important to him: "I would have hated it if you fought over us. Then we would have had trouble seeing Dad."

The joint custody agreement proved important in a world ruled by the Foreign Affairs Manual, because it allowed the children to be on my ex's orders, which meant that they could get regular, government-paid visits to post, or even decide to stay at post, if that became appropriate.

My ex-husband has a penchant for postings involving at least 24 hours of travel from the continental United States. I returned to my hometown in Wyoming, which added about six hours to any trip abroad. I was to be the primary caregiver, but visitation would be liberal.

Mostly, this meant that the children had to travel for the summer, and when possible, one school break a year, to those distant postings. Twenty-four to 40 hours of travel for each trip were not unusual for our children, from age 11 and up.

In the Air

How did these trips affect the children? “The first time I traveled by myself, I was a little worried,” our older son, Richard, says. “But we had done it so much with you and Dad that everything went smoothly.” Since he was the older brother, I had put him in charge of the tickets, passports, money and the like. My stoic younger son, Andrew, had little to say about the experience, yet he gladly took on responsibilities as he matured.

At the same time, Richard says he saw little benefit from seeing so many different countries. It was more about seeing his dad. Andrew agreed.

Still, my ex and I didn’t always agree on travel arrangements, and there are times when a mother feels she must protect her children. At one point, he wanted the children to fly to post for the summer even though a voluntary departure had been ordered. But State wouldn’t pay for it, and I refused to put the children on a plane. My ex acceded and arranged to leave post before July 4 (rare for a general services officer) so he could have his summer with the kids on home leave.

Another problem came up when the children could not make it home without an overnight hotel stay en route. Though their father felt they were old enough to do it on their own, I disagreed, and pointed out that hotel policy (no unaccompanied minors) would not allow it in any case.

He agreed to pay for a flight attendant to stay with them in an adjoining room, which turned out to be the right thing to do. Even though the boys were adept at ordering room service and knew to stay in their room, they still had difficulties with alarm clocks. The escort got them to their early morning connecting flight on time.

As the boys grew older, we had fewer disagreements over their transportation arrangements. Even when we had disputes, I did my best to vent to friends and not the children. Though we were no longer married, I had no desire to denigrate my ex in front of his children: it would have been unfair to him and especially to the boys, who should never have to choose between parents. I can truly say that I am delighted that they have a loving relationship with him.

The Value of Lists

So how did I cope with putting my children on dozens of long-haul flights over the years? I made lists. Each child and each bag would carry a complete list of contacts, including their father and me, the mission and all their aunts and uncles.

Then there would be the itinerary, which we spent time going over before each trip. I stressed how to read it; how much time they had between flights; what to do first (find the gate), next (get food), and last (get on the flight and settle in).

Passports, credit cards and cash hung around their necks and were never to be taken off. The travel documents almost never got lost. In trips involving a long London layover, their father sent them his international phone via FedEx, so they could call either of us at any time. A couple of brief calls were made just because the child was lonely.

In the early years, our sons always traveled together, and as “unaccompanied minors” were walked through the trip by airline employees. But even in subsequent years, the airlines would often scoop them up if there was a flight delay and take them to the children’s room for supervision.

A couple of nights were spent on plastic-encased mattresses on the floor of the Denver children’s room, when weather made them miss their flights. Ideal? No, but they were supervised. I expect that if they had gotten lost in the airport, and missed their flight, the same would have been done. I also knew that if they had trouble in a foreign airport, there was always a U.S. mission that could be called, and the children would be taken care of.

A year ago, I was lucky enough to have them for Christmas break. We flew together, and then I learned what savvy travelers they had become at ages 17 and 19. They truly did not need me to make any arrangements. They knew how to pack their bags and what they needed to carry on.

They nailed the entire security routine, from shoes to computers, and told me to stop nagging them, though I reminded them that just a year earlier, one of them had forgotten his passport, cash and credit card at security after clearing customs in Atlanta. (Something about a flight delay from London and a rush for the connection — and yes, the Transportation Security Administration did get everything back to us.)

Through kindness and agreement to do what was best for our children, despite occasional spats, my ex-husband and I worked out ways for him to have substantial time with the boys every year. And every year when they left for six to eight weeks with Dad, I would shed tears over my temporarily empty nest.

Now they are adults who know their father as well as their mother. And I know that this unexpected gift of travel skills and time with both their parents will stay in their hearts the rest of their lives. ■