If you're having a hard time being pleasant with your ex in front of the children, try using the time-tested psychological technique of imaging. In the sci-fi flick "Village of the Damned," the hero protected the Earth from psychic extraterrestrials by imagining a brick wall while a time-bomb he devised ticked away. Although it was hard for him to sustain the image of the wall, he was able to do so long enough for the bomb to blow up the aliens. In the same way, you can use imaging to view your ex-spouse as your children's parent, rather than the Nazi in "Sophie's Choice" (As long as we're talking about movies).

If the divorce has embittered you and your ex-spouse, you must be especially vigilant about keeping your children out of the storm. Protect your children from conflict at all costs. If you think you're delivering your children to the enemy, they will sense your tension. Glares and averted eyes are missed --and just barely --only by the toddler.

If tension is very high, as it might be at the beginning of the separation, it is better to have a third party make the exchange, or have one parent drop off the children at school or an after-school activity and the other parent pick up.

Participating in open conflict --whether it be screaming at each other or making snide remarks --is the single most damaging thing you can do to your children. Although you have no control over your ex, you do have control over yourself. Don't get dragged into a fight. Stay cool.

16 Steps for Reducing Parental Conflict

1. Communicate only when necessary.
2. Keep a mental image of your spouse as your children's parent.
3. Think of your parenting relationship as a business relationship.
4. Don't get hooked into old patterns of fighting or goaded into a nasty retort.
5. Use clear and simple language without taking a judgmental or accusatory stance.
6. Make the conversation as brief as possible.
7. End any communication that looks as if it might escalate into a shouting match.
8. When face-to-face with your ex-spouse during your children's transition from one home to the other, bury your feelings and exchange polite greetings. Keep it short.
9. Don't discuss arrangements or other business with your ex-spouse during transitions.
10. Turn the other cheek to any sarcastic or accusatory comments. Excuse yourself as quickly and politely as possible.
11. Don't exchange checks and money in front of your children.
12. Don't use children as messengers or delivery people.
13. Have a positive attitude.
14. Don't discuss anything with your spouse about the divorce at the exchange, including schedule changes.
15. Give a hug and a kiss good-bye to your children; wish them a good time.
16. Smile. A happy parent makes for secure children.

If Your Children Refuse to Go

In some cases, children will refuse to leave to be with the non-custodial parent. There are several reasons why this may happen:

1. A parent is not tuned into the children's interests or is not actively involved with the children during their time together.
2. Your children may be very young.
3. There is open conflict. One parent is alienating the children from the other.
4. In rare cases, child abuse.

If your children don't want to leave their primary home to be with her other parent, having a good heart-to-heart is the first step. The problem may be one that can be easily resolved, such as more attention given the children by the non-custodial parent, a change in discipline style, or having more toys or other entertainment.

Either or both parents may unknowingly be causing the children's refusal to go. Following are two checklists, one for the custodial parent and the other for the non-custodial parent. Be honest. You're the only one looking at this.

Custodial Parent

1. I have done my best to encourage my children's visits with his other parent.
2. I do not give double messages to my children about seeing their other parent.
3. I make sure my children know that, although I miss them, I know they will be well-taken care of. .
4. I tell my children I am fine when they're away.
5. I make sure to pack everything my children need, so their time with their other parent goes smoothly.

Non-Custodial Parent

- I understand it takes a while for my children to adjust to different surroundings, household rules, and customs. I don't pressure them to forget about their other parent when they're with me.
- I make a mental note if, after a reasonable amount of time with me, my children are not adjusting.
- I allow my children to speak to their other parent on the phone.
- I don't do my work when my children are with me and are awake.
- To stay involved with my children, I participate as much as possible in activities that center on their lives (Little League, dance class, play dates, and so on) instead of dragging them to things that are important to me but of no interest to them.

Scenes from Divorce: When Flexibility Is Important

Sara, who was 12 years old, called her father to tell him that she didn't want to go to his house on that weekend. She said that her girlfriends were having a slumber party, and she didn't want to miss it. Her father insisted that she not go to the party because that was his time to be with her.

This wasn't the first time Sara had to miss a social event because that was her weekend to see her father. She felt misunderstood and resented her father for keeping her friends. Ultimately, she started feeling as if she didn't want to be with him at all.

If her father and mother had been more flexible with the visitation schedule, on the other hand, Sara could have had her social life and would have felt that her father really understood and cared about her emotional and social needs.

Six months after his parents divorced, nine-year-old Allen began refusing to go to his father's place for the weekend. When asked on several occasions, he wouldn't say why. Finally, he admitted that he was bored because his father would spend most of his time finishing reports for work, and Allen had no one to play with. When Allen opened up about his feelings, his father made sure to do his work after Allen went to sleep and devoted his time to Allen. After that, Allen looked forward to his weekends with his Dad. What's your scenario? If your children are resisting visitation, scrutinize the situation. Perhaps a simple change will turn things around for you, too.

Very Young Children

Refusal to leave the custodial parent is most common in very young children because they are too young to carry a mental image of the parent to whom they are most attached (usually their mother) and fear abandonment.

For these young children, the transition from one parent to the other can set off anxiety about safety and survival. According to psychologist Janet Johnston, the foremost researcher in children and high-conflict divorce, children up to six years old may continue to have difficulty if they have had "repeated distressing separations and maintain an anxious attachment to the parent. It is also possible that children under the ages of 4 or 5 do not have a sufficient understanding of the concept of time and, for this reason, are confused about the particular visitation schedule. Consequently, they are anxious about when they will be reunited with the primary or custodial parent."

So if you and your ex-spouse get along, and your children are very young, the cause of your children's refusal to leave their residential home is likely normal, age-related separation anxiety. The non-custodial parent's recognition of this and willingness to work with the custodial parent to ease his or her children's anxiety will go a long way toward building trust and bonding with that parent. Insensitivity on the part of the non-custodial parent, on the other hand, can result in continual resistance to seeing him (or her) and the eventual failure of that children-parent relationship.

Open Warfare and Your Children's Refusal to Visit

When there is open conflict, children may resist leaving the custodial parent. The children may feel unsafe and cling to the custodial parent. They might feel a need to align themselves with one parent, usually the custodial parent. In some instances, one parent is, perhaps unconsciously, sabotaging the relationship the children have with the other parent. Of course, one parent can, ultimately, influence children to reject the other. But it's not as easy as you might think. According to psychologist Mitchell Baris, this sort of campaign is generally effective only when there's something amiss between the children and the targeted parent in the first place.

When a Parent Becomes the Target of a Smear Campaign

If you think your ex has begun to wage a campaign against you, suggest that your children see a mental health professional to aid their adjustment to visitation. If your ex refuses to seek help, you might be justified in believing you are a target of parental alienation.

If this is what is really going on, your children are in danger of losing a parent --you. That's why the courts see a red flag whenever they are presented with a case where a child refuses to visit a non-custodial parent.

You will definitely want to consult with a mental health professional in this instance, but be sure to consult your attorney as well.

Remember, if you have a good relationship with your children, they're not going to buy the hard line that you're awful if you aren't. Children know if you're a terrific parent. As long as you're totally tuned in to your children, empathetic with their emotional needs, and helping to build their self-esteem, the children can't be alienated from you.

If you are the custodial parent in a heavily litigated case and your children refuse to visit their other parent, make sure that you are not bad-mouthing your ex-spouse in front of your children or sending them negative messages. If you want what's best for your children, you must put aside your feelings toward your ex-spouse and encourage your children to develop or maintain a relationship with their other parent. If your children lose their other parent, their self-esteem will take a nose-dive, and they'll suffer feelings of abandonment --even if it now seems that they don't want to be with that parent.

Rebecca's parents separated because her father was seeing another woman. Rebecca was eight years old when her father moved out. Her mother was in shock. When the shock wore off, her mother was filled with rage. She did not hide her feelings from Rebecca. Instead, she told Rebecca that her father couldn't be trusted and that he was insensitive and even cruel.

Rebecca couldn't bear to see her mother so distressed. She aligned herself with her mother against her father. Even though she had been close to her father before the divorce, her angry feelings prevented her from relating to him. She didn't even want to see him.

Rebecca's father accused her mother of brainwashing Rebecca against him. He went to court to try to gain custody. The litigation was heated and drawn out. Rebecca suffered terribly from the fighting and the insecurity of not knowing where she would be living. She continued to refuse to see her father. Eventually, her father, who lost the custody battle, became less and less interested in fighting Rebecca's rejections of him. He and his girlfriend married and started a family of their own. As far as Rebecca was concerned, he found it easiest to just drift away.

What could Rebecca's father have done in this situation instead of giving up? For one thing, he might have realized that despite her current feelings, Rebecca needed his involvement to have healthy and happy relationships as an adult. Given this realization, he might have stayed around for the long haul. He could have been careful to let Rebecca know the door was always open for her. For instance, he might have continued to send regular post cards or letters, even if Rebecca did not respond. If she was like most children in this situation, she would have asked to see him again --in her own time.

Some parents alienate children from the other through a campaign of aggression and intimidation. Children come to see the intimidated parent as helpless and lacking in self-esteem and side with the "powerhouse." In this situation, the targeted parent must work to bolster his or her own self-esteem and self-respect, and the children will come around.

If You Are Concerned About Abuse

If your children seem fearful or refuse to visit the other parent on a regular basis, you might have a genuine concern about safety and even abuse. If this is the case, speak to your lawyer and a mental health professional before making any accusations to your ex-spouse.

The courts have been inundated with child abuse charges in divorce cases. The judges are leery of the parent who makes such charges if there is no hard evidence. False allegations can even result in a change of custody.

On the other hand, if your children are victims of abuse, there must be immediate intervention, generally in the form of supervised visitation. Despite the fact that judges frown on the accuser, statistics reveal about half of abuse charges turn out to be true.

If you feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, you are. So make certain that you have grounds for your belief before you make any accusations against your ex-spouse.