Handovers are where you are picking the kids up from your former partner to spend time with you, or when you are dropping them off again. They can be one of the few times that some separated parents, particularly those that have had a high conflict separation, come into contact again face-to-face. This means that they have the potential to be quite stressful, for children and parents alike.

The handover is where your children will see the two adults they love most, together, at the same time. The last thing they want is arguing, point scoring or nastiness.

Sometimes parents think that their children won’t notice this, particularly if they are young. This is not true though! At handover children will likely be in a heightened state of awareness, watching both parents carefully for signs of anger, relief or disinterest. If handovers are handled badly, they can create stress for children that can put them off future visits.

A little planning can go a long way in making handovers easier, both for your children and yourself. These tips are some of the things you may want to keep in mind:

**1. Acceptable venue**

Make sure the venue is suitable for both of you. If it can't be at home, a grandparents’ house can be a good spot for some families. It's friendly with toys and a television, food and loving adults. This can also be a good option if you find it too stressful to meet your former partner yet. If that's not possible, a fast food restaurant or similar can be useful. They are in a public place, the effect of lateness can be easily compensated for, there are comfort facilities and the stress levels can be reduced. Make sure you have everything that needs to be handed back ready, such as clean clothes, toys, and so on. Prepare yourself in advance for how you would react if the other parent says or does something that annoys you, so that you do not overreact or argue in front of the children. It would be a sad end to what should be a happy time for the children.

**2. Timekeeping**

Lateness is the first opportunity for one of you to start a tit-for-tat argument. Be on time, or at least keep everyone informed if you have to be late. Decide how you will respond to any negative comment. If a very important issue that needs discussing is raised during handover, try and arrange a time to speak about it later, and don’t involve the children if it isn’t appropriate. A little courtesy can go a long way in making sure handovers don’t lead to arguments!

**3. Keep the kids informed**

Keep the kids informed about the handover well in advance so nothing comes as a surprise. Where, when and what. Don't try to use the kids as a spy on your former partner, or send them home with messages from you. At no time should you expect the kids to chose between you and their other parent, or to take sides. Tell them about the next contact and what you plan to do. Don't set the kids up for something if it is unlikely to happen, like a big trip away. Only inform them of pre-arranged and booked events. Do not expect the kids to carry messages for you - either write, email or phone after the handover.

**4. No Bad mouthing**

No matter how polite and civil you and your former partner may be, children can be highly sensitive to any hostility - real or imagined. Make no sarcastic comments, have offensive nicknames, or negativity towards their other parent. Don't spend time bad mouthing your former partner in front of the kids and above all, do not interrogate them about any new adult 'friends' their other parent may now have. Let them volunteer information if they want to. They will be checking to see if you get angry and will clam up at the first hint of negative emotion. This time is about you and your children, not what your former partner is doing now you have separated.

**5. Communication**

It will ruin your children’s day to have a gruff, silent handover. Even if you have to send them up the garden path or get them to run across the car park, make it a happy event.

A parenting diary can be an easy way to ease communication between the two of you. Swap the diary back and forth at the time of handover and include all the parenting issues that need communicating. Include food, sleep, bedtime, late nights, doctors appointments, good moods, bad moods, homework to be completed, lost socks, anything that may be relevant to the two of you. You can also include the date, time and handover place for next time and, diplomatically, some 'suggestions'. Think about how you word things, and avoid accusations or hostility. For example, "Sally was upset about missing her ballet class... let me know when and where and I'll be glad to take her next time." instead of "Don't book ballet classes when I have contact", or "Sally seemed angry with me at first but eventually had a great time, please can you encourage her about the handover, we are going to the zoo next time, I'm sure she will enjoy it" instead of "Stop turning the kids against me".

Developing a happy handover is a process, not a success or a failure. If your handover is fraught with tension, concentrate on one or two things you plan to do successfully each time. Build up to a better event over a few weeks. Reflect on it afterwards and decide how you can improve it for next time. Don't get caught up with negative thinking, like "Why do I always have to make the effort, or "It could have been great but she ruined it.". Remember to keep smiling. That's what your kids want and that after all is what it's all about.