

Virginia Ironside's Dilemmas



Dear Virginia,

Our daughter has had two children by a man who turned out to be a violent bully. Halfway through her second pregnancy, she left him to live with us. The trouble is, his constant visits to see the children are unbearable for me - and her. And yet we're frightened to let him take the children away on his own. While my daughter has escaped daily life with him, it looks as if we are saddled with him all our lives. It seems the law is an ass. Is there any way round this?

Yours sincerely, Geraldine

When it comes to the law being an ass in contact cases with children, it's usually the fathers who complain, rather than the mothers. So I'm wondering if you or your daughter have consulted a lawyer? Is your daughter married to this man, for a start? If not, his legal rights may be very different, even if he has his name on the birth certificate. And if they are married, has your daughter started suing for divorce? And has she logged all his violent episodes? In other words, has she seen a solicitor and been advised about her and her children's rights, or has she just listened to some blustering nonsense given to her by her partner?

Obviously I think it's terribly important for fathers to have contact with their children, unless the children are in danger from them, and fathers should be encouraged to visit, and not put off. Half of fathers who separate from their partners lose complete touch with their children, so in one way you could admire this man for being so persistent. And remember that though he may have been a foul husband or partner, it's possible that he's a good father. And even if he's not that great, it might be better for the children to have a reasonably OK father on the scene, rather than no father at all.

But let's say he is the monster you describe, then why don't you just tell him that he's not allowed to visit for a while and force him to fight through the legal routes to establish his rights? Push him to make a positive effort to see the children rather than just assume the law's an ass and wait for him to roll up and terrify you all.

If you were to close ranks and refuse him access, your daughter would be allowed to put her reasons for not

wanting him visiting to a court, and he'd have to prove he wasn't a dangerous father. If what she says is true, I'm sure she could rustle up enough evidence from friends who've seen his behaviour to convince the court that if he did have access it would, at least, be supervised. Supervised access isn't much fun for anyone, but better than nothing for an absent father, and would reassure you all that he was never in a position to terrorise his children.

The truth is, of course, that even if the courts decreed that he should be able to see his children freely, it's possible for your daughter to be obstructive and constantly say they were ill, or out when he arrived. It's unlikely she'd be charged or put in prison. It's not a nice route, and not one that I'd recommend, but it's worth keeping in the back of your minds if only to add some iron to your voice when refusing any unreasonable demands.

NEXT WEEK'S DILEMMA

Dear Virginia,

How do I tell my children that I was adopted at birth? The answer is becoming quite urgent. The children are seven and five and I want to tell them myself but I don't know how to begin. I've tried to explain it to them a few times, but always bottle out at the last minute. I suppose I'm afraid it will upset them. I'm so afraid someone else will tell them first, because it's no secret in my circle that I'm adopted. Have you got any suggestions?

YOURS SINCERELY,
JAN

READERS SAY...

Stand up to this bully

Of course, when a split occurs, fathers have a right to see their children. However, the welfare of the children must always outweigh personal adult needs, and if this man is violent, it is not good for them to see you or their mother in a state of fear or be put in any potentially dangerous situation. I urge your daughter to seek legal advice about this as soon as possible. Perhaps supervised access visible could be arranged at a local centre? But if he has a history of violence, the relevant authorities and legal system should be made aware of this. Stand firm, stand up to this bully and don't let him carry on controlling your lives.

CHRISTINA BURTON
Eastbourne, East Sussex

Don't be intimidated

Your daughter's partner knows he intimidates you by his visits to the children. This is bullying. He wants to control, and the only way he knows how is to visit and make you all feel uncomfortable. If he has shown no violence or bullying tactics to the children, you should take the initiative and suggest to him that he takes the children away every second weekend rather than visit during the week.

Taking them away for the week-ends will allow more responsibility, more time and love, and show him that you accept him as the father. By allowing him to visit, you are allowing yourself to be intimidated and bullied. I'm sure he'd love to have the children for a whole weekend, and you'd love the peace of him not visiting. Suggest this to him, and have faith.

DENNIS
Guildford, Surrey

Try supervised contact

This is a truly horrible situation to be in, which I can empathise with directly. I emigrated to Canada with my wife 35 years ago. Tragically, our first child was premature and died after one short hour of his tiny life. After we got over our grief, we became foster parents. We ended up taking on a four-year-old boy and his two-year-old sister, who came from a violent (very violent - they came to us directly from hospital) family and they stayed with us for two years.

During that time they were legally required to maintain contact with their family. And therein lies the answer to this conundrum - supervised contact. My wife and I used to take

them to a monthly meeting supervised by The Children's Aid Society of Ottawa with their parents. The children ended up being adopted, with no further contact with their unfortunate past, but for them, as for your daughter, supervised contact is the immediate solution.

JIMMY BATES
Hereford

Protect yourselves

Violent men won't go away of their own accord, and you must protect yourselves against an escalation of violence. Get a restraining order put on him which will prevent him coming to your house and harassing you. Your daughter must apply for legal protection too. Courts take a very dim view of stalking and harassment these days.

They take an even stronger view when children may be at risk from abuse or violence - and this man is likely to use whatever leverage he can to cause you and your daughter grief. You can apply to the courts that he cannot see the children on his own without supervision - with a social worker present at all times. Do not let him take these children away for even an hour on his own.

There is much more help in place now than when I escaped from a violent bully - use everything in your power to get this sorted as soon as possible.

L BARKER
Stoford, Yeovil

Virginia Ironside is touring the country with her one-woman show, *The Virginia Monologues, Why it's Great to be Sixty*, this month. For details, visit virginiaironside.org



What would you advise Jan to do? Email your dilemmas and comments to dilemmas@independent.co.uk or go to independent.co.uk/dilemmas. Anyone whose advice is quoted will receive a Belgian Chocolate Selection by Amelie Chocolat (www.ameliechocolat.co.uk)

As If ... By Sally Ann Lasson



To see more cartoons by Sally Ann Lasson, go to www.sallyannlasson.com.

Days Like These

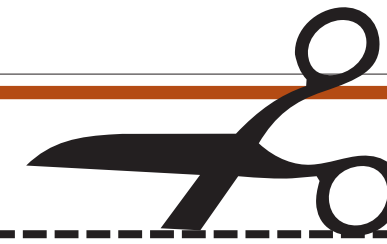


5 APRIL 1968
ROBERT F KENNEDY speaks: "We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions among men and learn to find our own advancement in the search for the advancement of others. We must admit that our own children's future cannot be built on the misfortunes of others. We must recognise that this short life can neither be ennobled or enriched by hatred or revenge."

"Our lives on this planet are too short and the work to be done too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in our land. Of course we cannot vanquish it with a program, nor with a resolution.

"But we can perhaps remember, if only for a time, that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life; that they seek, as do we, nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfilment they can."

COMPILED BY JAMIE MERRILL



SAVE!
SAVE!
SAVE!
ON PIZZA



FREE
LESSON
IN HOW
TO EAT
FIRE

Offers you can't refuse

Thanks to the recession and their availability on the internet, money-saving coupons are popular again - and there's no shame in using them, vouches **Adharanand Finn**

I'm standing at the checkout in Waitrose clutching a packet of Nature Babycare nappies under my arm. I should have used a basket, I think, or at least bought some other shopping as well. It's OK, I remind myself, you're not doing anything wrong.

At the till, I smile at the cashier, casually handing over the nappies and a £6 coupon - the nappies cost £5.99. I try not to look like I'm slipping her a bribe. She studies the coupon for an uncomfortably long time before saying "Just a minute" and walking off to confer with her supervisor. I have an urge to scarpie, or to offer loudly to pay for the nappies, explaining what a huge mistake it's all been. She returns.

"We won't be able to refund you the 1p," she says. That's it? She hands me the nappies. I'm free to go. I feel victorious, as though I've got away with something. So long, suckers, the nappies are mine.

The coupon came my way via my voucher-savvy brother, who told me that if I signed up on the Nature Babycare website, I could get a further £3 off my next packet. And if my wife did the same, we'd get another free packet. So I did, and it was true. What was this? Free stuff? Was there any more where these came from? I decided to see how much money I could save in a week using coupons and vouchers.

The coupon industry is in rude health. This is partly due to the continued growth of the internet, which has been harnessed by consumers and businesses as a quick and easy way of disseminating vouchers and coupons. Their popularity has also been aided by the recession. Martin Lewis, the creator of the website Moneysavingexpert.com, says the stigma attached to vouchers has disappeared now that it is "chic to be cheap". His site recently did a survey and found that around 50 per cent of people even thought it was fine to use a voucher in a restaurant on a first date.

Oliver Felstead, the sales and marketing director at Couponstar, a company specialising in grocery coupons, agrees that the financial

difficulties have brought about a change in consumer psyche.

"Until 2007, the coupon industry was in decline," he says. "But the recession has changed consumer behaviour. In 2007, coupon distribution in the UK was up 20 per cent year-on-year, and that rise has continued since then."

Once you start looking for them, there seem to be coupons and vouchers everywhere. Even as I spend my second nappy coupon, the cashier hands me a £5-off voucher for Boots' No 7 skincare range. It's not really my thing, but my mother-in-law is a fan and is delighted when I give her the voucher.

My wife, walking into H&M the very next day, is handed a 20 per cent-off voucher, which she promptly uses to buy herself a cardigan. Even stepping off the train, someone hands me a voucher for 50p off a Kit Kat and coffee on my return journey. What's going on? I don't remember seeing so many vouchers before.

However, like some slot machine that has drawn me in with an early jackpot, the returns appear to be diminishing. I don't usually drink coffee or eat Kit Kats on the train, so to use that last voucher would actually involve spending more money, rather than saving. Which is, of course, what all coupons and vouchers are trying to get you to do. The corporate world hasn't suddenly gone soft. But is using vouchers a game you can play, and win? Or will you always lose out?

“The cashier gives me a suspicious look, and everyone watches us

Lewis says more people are playing the voucher game. He has recently seen a rise in what he calls "voucheristas", who are people who actually decide what to buy and where to shop depending on what vouchers are available. Another category of voucher shopper, he says, is the "tactical buyer". This is someone who knows what he wants to buy, but will wait until a voucher becomes available before going into the shop to "blitz it".

To find vouchers, the place to start is online. The best sites I found were Lewis's own Moneysavingexpert.com, Beforeishop.co.uk and Vouchercodes.co.uk. For a novice such as I, however, it's easy to get lost wading through the river of deals, particularly if you venture on to the proliferation of less scrupulous sites listing offers that have long expired.

Felstead recommends registering on the websites of your favourite brands, as often the best coupons are mailed out this way through newsletters. For the hardestiest coupon-hunters, there are Facebook groups and a Twitter service to tell you when new deals become available, and even iPhone vouchers that alert you as you walk past the shop in question. Vouchers, it seems, have moved on from the stereotypical image of old ladies cutting coupons out of magazines.

After searching through reams of misleading non-deals and offers on things I don't want, I eventually manage to print myself off two more

coupons, one for a free bar of Milka and one for 40p off a packet of Kettle Chips. As I hand the vouchers over in my local Tesco, however, the cashier gives me such a suspicious look it makes people in the other queues turn around to see what is happening. In the end, she calls her supervisor, which causes grunts of disapproval in the queue behind me. At no point do either the cashier or her supervisor apologise to me for the hold-up. They seem to hold me to blame and eye me with mistrust. I get my Swiss chocolate and posh crisps for just 60p, but the saving is tainted by the checkout tribulation.

One place where vouchers are accepted without so much ado is in chain restaurants such as PizzaExpress, Strada and Ask. I eat out twice in my voucher-hunting week, and both times I use two-for-one offers. The first meal is with my coupon-expert brother. He says it is stupid to eat in these restaurants without a voucher. You can find them online in two minutes, print them off, and save yourself £10. Indeed, the waiter in Strada accepts the voucher as though he has seen a hundred already that day.

My second outing is a family meal on my birthday. I ask the waitress if many people use vouchers there and she looks at me as if I'm mad. "Everyone," she says, before explaining how the staff actually look forward to Fridays and Saturdays, when people can't use vouchers, because of all the paperwork involved with them.

So at the end of my week of wheeling and dealing on the coupon market, how did I fare? My haul of goodies includes cheap nappies, a free chocolate bar, a cheap bag of crisps, £10 off an online Tesco order, and two half-price meals (and a cheap cardigan for my wife and some face cream for my mother-in-law). Not bad - although possibly not worth the time I spent wading through offers on everything from shoes to toasters, bikes to leg waxing - and I was even offered 10 per cent off the services of Divorce-Online, and 51 per cent off a fire-eating workshop.

The more practised you get, the easier it is to target the most relevant deals. It depends how badly you want it, but if you do, coupons can save you money. Well, a little bit.

