

# Making Your Parenting Plan Work

## Introduction

Separation and divorce is a time of stress for adults and children. For many adults the challenges of parenting after separation and divorce seem overwhelming. In addition to helping their children cope with feelings of sadness, anger and confusion, parents have the task of cooperating with one another. Structuring a parenting plan is an important step in making a positive adjustment to separation and divorce. A parenting plan can serve as a guide, spelling out the times when the children will be with each parent. A parenting plan can help parents resolve conflicts over issues such as holidays and vacations, and provide a mechanism for communication between children and both parents. And, a parenting plan can detail arrangements for the children's education, health care, involvement in enrichment programs and religious upbringing.

Although every child is different and has individual needs and preferences, it is important to know that there are certain things that benefit all children. This brochure provides information that will enable you to help your children make a better adjustment to separation and divorce. This information can be included in your parenting plan—making it work better for you and your children.

## What Every Child Needs

### **Children benefit from two loving parents:**

It is important to remember that your children did not cause your relationship to end. They are entitled to the best possible relationship with both parents. Children need to know that both parents love them and will be there for them. Children need to be free to love each parent without being subjected to the other parent's hurt or anger.

### **Children benefit from information:**

It is helpful to provide some basic information to help your children understand what is happening. You should not share any details of your adult disagreements from the past. Instead, give your children specific information about what will happen next. Information about where they will live and go to school, when they will be seeing grandparents, where they will spend holidays, and what will happen to their things is important to them. Sit down with your children, together if possible, and discuss your plans for parenting.

### **Children benefit from parental cooperation:**

It is often difficult for parents to keep their conflicts away from the children, but very important to do so. Do your best to treat the other parent in a courteous manner. Do not involve your children in your disagreement with the other parent. Never ask your children to pass messages back and forth.

### **Children benefit from financial support:**

Both parents have a duty to provide for the monetary needs of their children. This is done most often by child support; the laws and child support guidelines in your state help define each parent's responsibility. While it may be that both parents are dissatisfied with the financial consequences of separation and divorce, this should never be your children's burden. It is important to understand that children should not be brought into conflicts over money, nor used as a bargaining chip.

### **Children benefit from stability:**

Most children benefit from a stable schedule so that they know what days and nights they will be with each parent. It is generally helpful to put a parenting schedule in place as quickly as possible after separation. Because of age differences and

individual personalities and preferences, parenting plans should be designed to fit your children and your circumstances. Between now and the time your children become adults, your situation — and your parenting plan — is likely to change. The first step is very important.

## Considerations for Parenting Plan Schedules

It is important to consider school and work schedules and other activities when planning your parenting schedule. When both parents have been actively involved in parenting, it is helpful to make a schedule that allows each to continue with past responsibilities. Situations in which one parent had more of the day-to-day responsibilities may provide opportunities to discuss how these responsibilities will be shared in the future.

Parents should also consider the ages and developmental needs of their children. Below are some general guidelines to consider:

**Infants** (birth to 18 months) are helped by seeing both parents as often as possible. Both parents should be involved in routine activities such as feeding, bathing and changing the children. Establishing predictable routines is helpful. If both parents have been active in care taking, overnights that do not interfere with the sleep and feeding schedule may be considered.

**Toddlers** (18 months to 3 years) are often experiencing the "terrible twos." Negative or demanding behavior is normal for these children. It is not typically the result of parenting. A consistent and predictable routine will help provide security and stability for these children.

**Preschoolers** (3-5 years) are able to spend as many as three days away from a parent and can tolerate a more flexible schedule than younger children. They will want to spend time with other children, and parents should encourage

this. Children this age often blame themselves for the separation or divorce. Reassure your children that this is not the case.

**School-aged children** (6-10 years) can handle longer periods of time away from a parent. They can also be very attached to the idea of "family" and may frequently wish their parents back together. It is important that the parenting plan accommodate the children's school and activity schedule. Some parents alternate weeks with the children, while others plan shorter, more frequent time periods.

**Early adolescents** (11-13 years) are much more focused on their friends and extracurricular activities. They may start to express criticism of one or both parents, or resist new partners or their parents. They often want to have a say in living arrangements and parents should listen carefully and fully consider their views. However, it is important to be clear that it is the parents who will make the final decision about living arrangements.

**Teenagers** (14-18 years) become increasingly independent and may want to have their parenting plan revised to meet their needs. A parenting plan should not prevent them from being involved with activities, after school jobs or friends. Many teens want to have a primary home where they know that they can be contacted and parents may wish to consider this.

## Making Your Parenting Plan Work

- **Support your parenting plan.** If you show acceptance of the parenting plan, your children will too. Comply with the parenting plan even if you feel that the other parent is not doing so.
- **Be available to your children.** Your children need to be able to depend on you to follow through with the parenting plan. Children can be heartbroken and disappointed when parents move in and out of their lives.

## Questions and Answers Regarding Shared Parenting

- **Be a good listener.** Be a sounding board for issues between your children and the other parent without expressing judgment.
- **Take it slow.** If you are involved in another relationship, wait awhile to introduce that person to your child. Give your children some time to adjust to the new family situation before they have to share you with a new partner.
- **Support your children emotionally.** Your children may become moody, withdrawn, angry—and behave accordingly. Arrange for counseling if emotional or behavioral problems continue. By supporting your children's feelings, you are promoting a healthy adjustment to their new living arrangements.
- **Demonstrate consistent discipline.** Children can be very self-centered. They may try to manipulate each parent for time or a toy they want. It is not helpful to compete with the other parent for the children's love or affection. Constructive discipline and a consistent presence will strengthen your relationship and teach your children responsibility.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** You may find it helpful to seek support if you are having trouble accepting the changes accompanying the end of a relationship. Remember, the better you adjust, the better your children will adjust.

**Q:** Is there a "best" parenting plan?

**A:** The best parenting plan is one that takes into consideration the needs of all family members and enables children to maintain a healthy and loving relationship with both parents. A parenting plan will have the best chance of success if parents are able to work out the plan together. Considerations should include school and work schedules, social and family obligations, your children's ages and developmental needs and the safety and special needs of family members.

**Q:** What happens when parents live far apart?

**A:** Long distance parenting presents special challenges. The frequency and length of parenting time must be fitted to the age and school responsibilities of children. Special attention needs to be given to travel arrangements. With older adolescents, jobs, friends and school activities may conflict with access. Phone and Internet communication can help sustain relationships.

**Q:** What if my children say they don't want to spend time with the other parent?

**A:** Both parents should work together to find out what is bothering the children. If the behavior continues, consider talking to a counselor about it. Sometimes counseling for the children and parents can be helpful.

**Q:** What if there are concerns about safety?

**A:** In some cases where there are concerns about child abuse or domestic violence, it is best for the children to have their time with

a parent supervised by a third party. A court may order supervision or a neutral place of exchange if concerns are expressed about safety.

**Q:** What if problems with the parenting plan arise?

**A:** Some problems may be the result of emotional issues or ongoing conflict between parents. Counseling may help resolve the issues. If you are unable to resolve these differences by talking or through counseling, consider mediation. A mediator can help you discuss the problems and work toward a cooperative solution.

**Q:** How can I get the parenting plan enforced?

**A:** If your parenting plan has been filed with the court, it may be enforced by the court. For further information contact your lawyer or a local court-connected mediation program, Bar Association, Clerk of the Court or Office of Child Support Enforcement.

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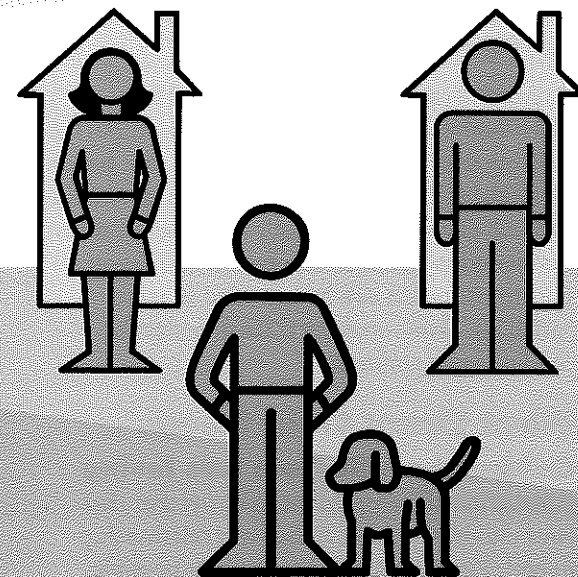
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