

Understanding Your Child's Needs Information for Never-Married Parents

Parents are parents, whether married or not. Even if never-married parents end their relationship, parental responsibilities do not end. This can be difficult as you cope with the feelings you have about each other. Children depend on you to understand and meet their needs—especially at this painful time.

This brochure from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts provides information about your child's needs, parenting responsibilities and legal custody issues.

Your child will benefit from having *both* parents involved in his or her life.

Your Child

Every child is unique; yet all children have similar needs.

Q: Can you work toward your child having a close and loving relationship with each of you?

A: Children need a healthy relationship with a mother and a father. A child's sense of identity and self-esteem come from stable relationships with both parents.

Q: Can you work together to help your child feel a part of your family?

A: It is in your child's best interests to be loved by caring family members. Children feel secure when they have the support of other family members, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Q: Can you work out an agreement that assures financial support for your child?

A: Children need your financial support. This means both of you have a responsibility to provide financially for your child.

Parental Rights and Responsibilities

Along with parental rights come parental responsibilities. You may have strong feelings about the other parent that can get in the way of your child's relationship with the other parent.

Q: Can you set aside any negative feelings you have about the other parent so your child doesn't get caught in the middle?

A: Being a mom or a dad is more than "having custody." Being a good parent is not about being named the mother or the father; it's about your relationship with your children. Are you actively involved with your child?

Promote your child's relationship with the other parent by showing respect to the other parent. Try and cooperate. Keep the other parent informed about your child's interests and activities.

Q: Can you do your part to assure that both of you can enjoy your child's accomplishments?

A: Honor your commitments. Pick up and return your children on time. Avoid "on again, off again" parenting. Your reliability—or lack of it—will be remembered by your child.

Q: Can you set an example for your child?

A: Physical, sexual and emotional violence is unacceptable. Seek help from a domestic violence counselor or shelter, if needed. Neutral exchange sites may be helpful for safety and security.

Establishing Paternity

There are lots of good reasons to establish paternity. Your child will have a father who may be more involved. Your child will have access to medical information that could be important in a medical emergency or illness.

Establishing paternity means confirming a father's legal rights and responsibilities. The most direct way to establish paternity is at birth. Either parent may sign a paternity statement.

When paternity is uncertain, the mother may be asked to name the person she believes is the father. He will be notified and given an opportunity to acknowledge paternity.

If a parent is receiving public support for the child, the state may bring the case to court to establish paternity and financial support. Blood or genetic testing may be ordered. Each state will determine the amount of child support based on its own laws and child support guidelines.

Parenting Skills

Most of us learned how to be a parent from our own parents or the people who raised us. Good parenting is not always automatic. It can be learned. Attending parenting classes may be helpful.

Parenting classes can help you learn about:

- Child development and stages of growth
- Communicating with a child
- Recognizing misbehavior in a child
- Appropriate discipline

Most communities have parenting classes. For information about parenting classes contact your local Family Court, mental health agency, university extension, hospital, health care center or school district.

Don't be embarrassed about going to parenting classes. Learning about your child's needs is the right thing to do.

Parenting Plans

Children need time with both parents. A parenting plan defines the time that each of you is responsible for your child.

In addition to a clear schedule of the time a child is in the care of a parent, a parenting plan can address a parent's participation in education, health care, religious upbringing, decision making and financial support for additional expenses.

Although courts can determine a parenting plan for you, it is usually best if parents work out their own schedule. A mediator, counselor or attorney can help with this.

Here are some basic principles for a parenting plan:

- A child's time with each parent is influenced by the child's age and maturity.
- Work out a plan for time sharing that is realistic and fits with your schedule and that of your child.
- Stick with the schedule, even if it is difficult at first, because this builds trust between you and your child.
- It is difficult to predict how a child will respond to a schedule. If your child has not had contact with a parent for an extended period of time, contact can be established on a more gradual basis.
- School-age children benefit from predictable schedules. Parents need to cooperate to assure a balance between school, sleep, play and involvement in sports and other activities.
- Older children should be given the opportunity to state their views about time with a parent. However, be cautious about letting a child *determine* the schedule. This puts great pressure on the child.

Suggested Reading

Brochures from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts:

A Guide for Joint Custody and Shared Parenting

A Guide for Stepparents

FAQs — Parents Ask about Separation, Divorce and Child Custody

FAQs — Questions Separating and Divorcing Parents Ask about Legal Matters

Is Mediation for Us?

Making Your Parenting Plan Work

My Mom and Dad Are Getting a Divorce

Parents Are Forever

Preparing for Your Custody Evaluation

Understanding Your Child's Needs—Information for Never-Married Parents

When Parents Relocate: Moving Away and Long-distance Parenting

Children of Divorce

Association of Family and Conciliation Courts

Mom's House, Dad's House

by Isolina Ricci. Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Single Fathers

by Geoffrey Greif. Lexington Books, 1985.

Single Parenting: A Practical Resource Guide

by Stephen Atlas. Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Single Parent Families

by Kris Kissman and Jo Ann Allen.,

Thousand Oaks CA Sage Publications, 1993.

Today's Father: For Men Who Want To Be Better

Dads by Ken Canfield. National Center for Fathering, 1996.

Where to Get Help

For further information:

Child Support: Contact your state office of Child Support Enforcement for advice on child support enforcement actions.

Mediation and Parent Education: Contact your local Family Court Services about Parent Education Courses in your area.

Establishing Paternity: Contact the state office of Child Support Enforcement or a private attorney.

Counseling: Contact your local community health association.

Domestic Violence: Contact the local domestic violence advocacy group or shelter.

Developed by AFCC members Phil Bushard and Doneldon Dennis.

Additional copies of this brochure may be purchased from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts

Order on-line at www.afccnet.org or contact:



ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY
AND CONCILIATION COURTS

AFCC

Phone: 608.664.3750

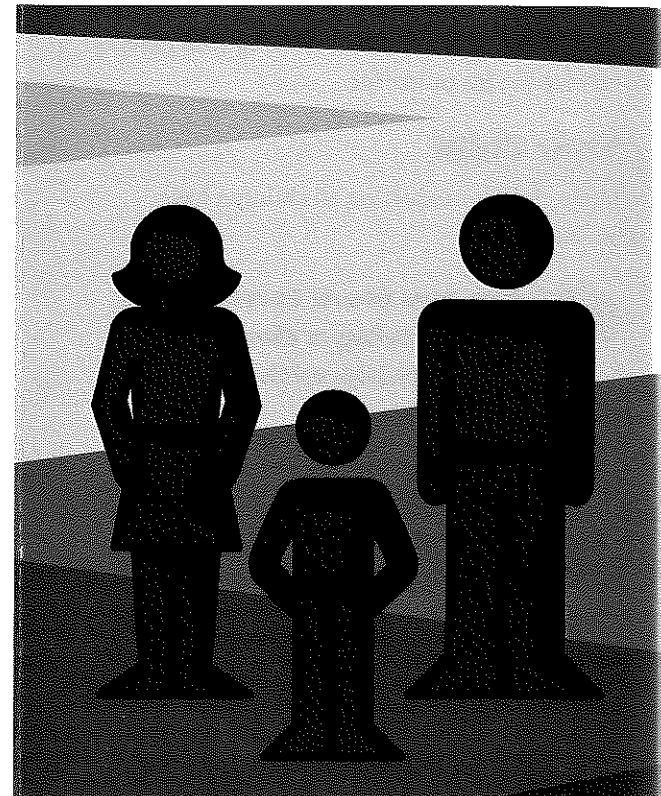
Fax: 608.664.3751

E-mail: afcc@afccnet.org

Web: www.afccnet.org

© 2003 Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.
All rights reserved.

Understanding Your Child's Needs INFORMATION FOR NEVER-MARRIED PARENTS



ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY
AND CONCILIATION COURTS