

Parenting Plan Considerations

In General

- What is fair and equal for the parents is not necessarily what is best for the child. While children benefit from their involvement with two competent parents, the aim of a parenting plan should not be equal time for parents, but stability for children.
- For young children under age three, the most important thing is to nurture and preserve their primary attachment. Attachment does not signify who loves the child more or who the child loves most. It describes the infants' instinctual drive for closeness to a primary caregiver for safety and security. In infants, physical separation from their primary caregiver can cause anxiety and anger, followed by sadness and despair.
- A child with a healthy primary attachment can develop multiple attachments. A child without a healthy primary attachment will struggle to attain any healthy attachments.
- A 50/50 arrangement should only be considered when there is no or low parental conflict, high communication between the parents, parents consistently demonstrate a willingness and ability to cooperatively work together, and both parents live close in proximity, providing equal access to the same school, peers and activities.
- Research has shown that the impact of parental conflict is the single most negative factor in a healthy outcome for children. Children who are exposed to parental hostility are at high risk for later emotional disturbance. They are more likely to have problems in school, be more sexually active, more aggressive, anxious, depressed, withdrawn, and more likely to abuse drugs and to participate in delinquent acts than their peers.
- The aim of a workable parenting plan is to build healthy relationships between the parents and the child. Moving too quickly into lengthy visits could have an opposite, potentially disruptive, effect on the relationship-building process.
- When parents are in conflict, parents or courts may need to consider a neutral transition plan (at daycare, school or professionally supervised) so the child is protected from the distress parental conflict can cause.
- Parents must consider their children's individual needs when they develop shared parenting plans. Children differ in how they cope and adjust to their parents' separation.
- If there is more than one child, a different schedule for each child may be considered. A schedule that works well for an eight year old, may not work for a teenager. The schedule should also allow all children to be together at certain times, as well.
- When a parent has not been an active parent prior to separation, the initial parenting plan should allow that parent enough time to develop a positive relationship with the child, without creating anxiety for the child. As the parent-child bond strengthens, changes can be made to the plan.
- Parents who have been absent for a length of time (perhaps in the military or due to job requirements) need to build trust gradually with their children, so their children have an opportunity to get to know them.

Birth to One Year

- Infants should reside with the person who has been the primary source of nurturing.
- Overnights are not generally considered. However, some experts cautiously recommend overnights when both parents significantly participated in all aspects of the child care prior to the separation. Even when this criterion is met, overnights are minimal, one per week.
- When the child develops a healthy primary attachment, the child can attach to others. Visits can be most of the day from the beginning if the caregiver is attuned and consistently meets the child's needs. Separation of more than two days from the primary attachment figure may interfere with that attachment. Parents are not interchangeable.
- It is important to maintain an infant's basic sleep, feeding and waking cycle. Visits should take into consideration the child's schedule for feeding, playing, bathing, and putting the infant to sleep.
- Infants are especially vulnerable to conflict and need smooth routines that shield them from the emotional upset of conflicting parents.
- As bonding and the relationship to the non-residential parent strengthens, the longer the contact can be.

Some ideas for planning for an infant less than 12 months old, depending on parents' schedules and participation in child care prior to separation are:

Three periods of 3-5 hours spaced throughout each week

Two periods of 4-6 hours spaced throughout each week

Two 3-5 hour periods and one 8 hour period spaced throughout each week

Two periods of 3-6 hour and 1 overnight each week

One to Three Years

- Toddlers up to 2½ years should reside with the parent who has been the primary source of nurturing.
- Overnights still are not generally recommended. However, experts are cautious in recommending overnights when both parents had **significantly** participated in all aspects of the child care prior to the separation. Even when this criterion is met, overnights are minimal.
- Toddlers need a fairly rigid schedule to provide them with predictability. A parenting schedule that allows toddlers frequent contact (3-5 times each week) with both parents is best, when two competent parents can keep their conflict low or minimize their interactions to protect the children from being exposed to their conflict.

One to Three Years Continued..

- Frequent contact is not recommended when there is a high degree of conflict between parents, except when children can transition between homes without parent-to-parent contact (neutral transition places, i.e. daycare).
- If contact is regular and frequent, the child can tolerate most of a day.
- If contact is not frequent, shorter times (1-3 hours) should be considered, to prevent infant distress due to separation from their primary caregiver. More time can be added as the child and the bond develops.
- By the time a child reaches three, they have a better memory. A child can go for longer periods of time without seeing a parent.
- Many three year olds can tolerate up to two non-consecutive overnights a week. Weekends or longer time periods during the summer can be difficult.

Three to Five Years

- Three to five year olds are attached to their regular caregivers and separation from them may cause them to be fearful, uncomfortable, or anxious. They may have trouble moving between the parent's homes. Consistent, sensitive responses may help your child.
- If one parent was minimally involved in the child's daily routine, a few days each week including a full weekend day will allow the relationship to develop. As the child becomes more comfortable moving between two homes, additional time and one or two overnights may be added.
- If a child is in daycare during the week, consider splitting each weekend so the child has one full stay-at-home day and an overnight with each parent every week.
- An every other weekend schedule with weekly midweek contact could work for the older child in this age group.

Six to Eight Years

- For children this age a regular routine is important.
- The parenting schedule should provide the child with opportunities to maintain contact with friends and participate in after-school activities.
- Many children still require a home base while being with their other parent from one to three days a week.
- Multiple overnights are usually okay.
- A full week at each parent's home could be phased in by age eight, for families with low conflict, effective communication and close proximity.

At this age, most children have difficulty with a 50/50 arrangement, going back and forth between homes and attending school from two homes. A 60/40 arrangement may be better, provided that the conflict between the parents is low, and both parents live close in proximity, allowing access to the same schools, peers and activities.

Nine to Twelve Years

- While children benefit from the involvement of two competent parents, many children desire one home base with specific evenings, weekends, and activities at the other home.
- Some children do well with equal contact in each home. **A 50/50 arrangement should only be considered when there is low conflict, parents have been able to successfully work together, and both parents live close in proximity, providing equal access to the same school, peers and activities.**
- Often children prefer a home base. Many children this age report that it is too confusing and burdensome to pack up and shift homes weekly. Many report losing a sense of belonging, losing a sense of feeling personally anchored.
- The schedule should be regular and predictable. It should minimize interference with peer relationships, school, and after-school activities.
- At this age, children need more flexibility to accommodate their extra-curricular activities and their increasing social lives.

Thirteen to Seventeen Years

- Teens are capable of forming an opinion about where and with whom they want to live. This opinion should be considered, but not necessarily followed.
- Teens need some say in planning the schedule. Sports, extra-curricular activities, jobs and their social lives need to be considered.
- Teens typically prefer to spend their time with their peers. They do not need contact of long duration with either parent. Positive contact once or twice each week for an hour or more, dinner or an activity for example, may be enough to maintain a close parent/child relationship. When parents focus on meeting the needs of their teen and keeping the time spent together positive their relationship will gather strength. When parents focus on getting their ‘fair or equal share’ of time with their child, both the child and the parent/child relationship suffers.
- Some teens need one home base with regular and predictable evenings, weekends, and activities at the other home. Some teens prefer a more equal basis with each parent.
- It is important for the teen to maintain accessibility to school, activities, and peers from both homes.