

# Developing Co-Parenting Plans

## The organization of cooperative parenting schedules

A co-parenting plan is a written document that outlines how parents will raise their children after separation or divorce. Developed with the best interests of children in mind, a co-parenting plan details how much time children will spend time with each parent, scheduling details, how major and minor decisions about children will be made, exchanges of information and ongoing communication about the children, children's extra-curricular activities, and how parental disputes will be resolved. A written plan will help all family members to know what is expected of them and will be a valuable reference as time passes and family circumstances change. While parenting plans take many forms, it is important to include the following five clauses in the written agreement:

(1) *A general statement to begin the agreement:* The parents will cooperatively share the parenting of the children, with co-parenting defined as having two core elements: shared responsibility for important decision-making as well as the daily routine parenting of the children, and parental cooperation with respect to same. This includes respect for one another's parenting style and authority; that is, parents agree to say or do nothing that will harm the relationship of the other parent with their children. A helpful clause to include in this section is, "The parents agree to foster love and affection between their children and the other parent."

(2) *Sharing of parental responsibilities:* The parents agree to confer on all important matters affecting the welfare of the children, including education, health, and religious upbringing. They agree that each will have access to medical and school records. There should also be a clause saying that day-to-day decisions are the responsibility of the parent with whom the child is living.

(3) *The specifics of the actual time-sharing and residential arrangement:* This includes overnight stays, routine time, and activity time.

(4) *Details regarding holidays and special days and observances:* This includes overnight stays, routine time, and activity time.

(5) *The agreement time period, and amendments to the agreement:* End with a clause indicating the length of the agreement, and that the plan will be reexamined at a later fixed time, or from time to time. If no revisions are deemed necessary after the agreed time period, the agreement is automatically renewable. A clause specifying the manner in which parents will settle disputed issues in the future, with an emphasis on cooperation and a return to mediation if necessary, is also essential.

Explicit guidelines for co-parenting can be developed at the time the co-parenting plan is drafted. These may include: respect the other's parenting rules; avoid criticizing the other parent, directly or indirectly; avoid placing a child in the middle of an argument or using a child as a messenger; stick to the time-sharing schedule and keep promises, but also be flexible in a way that meets the children's and the other parent's needs (try to accommodate the other parent's request for changes, but the other parent should remember that even small changes to the schedule that occur with little forewarning can cause major problems); make transitions as comfortable as possible for the child (be positive about the child's stay with the other parent; be courteous with the other parent; once the child settles back in, let her talk freely about the other parent or the other home); and respect each other's privacy (keep contacts and communications restricted to set times, and to child-related matters).

While the co-parenting plan should usually be highly structured at the beginning, over time, flexibility, [creativity](#), and compromise should be encouraged. Changes to the plan over time are inevitable; parenting arrangements will require reevaluation and change over time, based on children's changing developmental needs and the parents' own changing circumstances.

Contingency planning sets the stage for needed future changes. Potential obstacles and areas of conflict regarding parenting can be anticipated; issues such as changing job demands, relocation, and how to deal with children's changing developmental needs need to be discussed. Remarriage or cohabitation and stepfamily formation may affect co-parenting in a significant way, as the problem of mistrust often reemerges when new members join the family

Once a co-parenting plan has been negotiated and drafted, it should be implemented for a specified trial period, anywhere between 6-12 months. At the end of the trial period, the plan is reviewed and made permanent, modified, or abandoned. It is important to know that the plan you initially negotiate is not irrevocable.

Establishing a routine and an environment conducive to children's adaptation to the new co-parenting arrangement are critical tasks for both parents. Children are generally [anxious](#) to know the specifics of their new routine, and the predictability of a clear schedule facilitates adaptation. They also prefer to develop a sense of "belonging" in both of their parents' homes, and will adapt more easily if they have a place of their own in each house, which they have helped in creating. Other important considerations include deciding on children's items that need to be duplicated (toothbrushes, nightclothes, school supplies, diapers and baby supplies for infants), those that are divided between the two homes (shoes and clothing apportioned in measure with how much time is spent in each residence, toys, books), and those that will go back and forth between the two homes (cherished toys, bicycles, musical instruments).

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