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## Designing a Successful Parenting Plan

by Dr. Donald Gordon and Dr. Jack Arbuthnot

Virginia Satir, a well-known psychologist in the family and divorce field, once said, "Parents are teachers of human beings, not owners of human beings." This is a wise view to keep in mind when creating your parenting plan. A child needs the love and affection of both parents, but they also need both as teachers. These roles should override your desire to "own" your children. Ultimately, you cannot own them: you can only prepare them for their future. How well you prepare them will ultimately reflect your qualities as parents.

Another well-known expert in this field, Joan Kelly, has observed that, "It is not the divorce per se, but the conditions and agreements the parents create during and after the divorce that will determine the child's adjustment." The marriage is over, as are your lives as Mom and Dad parenting under the same roof. You will begin new lives as Mom and Dad parenting apart.

There are three basic types of living arrangements for children: sole custody, split custody, and shared custody. The most common is sole custody, in which one parent becomes the resident parent while the other has "reasonable access." About 70% of all parenting plans result in the mom being the resident parent – although the number of fathers becoming the resident parent increases with income.

### The Language of Parenting Plans

Most parents say they want to "win custody" of the kids. This suggests control – or possession – of the children is the goal. Instead, your goal should be to work out the best parenting plan for your children, so call it a parenting plan rather than a custody battle. The child may be in one parent's home more than the other; refer to that person as the "primary residential parent," not as the "custodial parent." The other parent should be viewed as the "secondary residential parent," not someone who just has visitation rights. No caring and involved parent wants to just "visit" his or her kids.

In split parenting plans custody of the children is divided: one or more child/ren may go to one parent, and the other child/children the other; boys often go to fathers and girls to mothers. However, this is rare in initial separation decrees, and it generally only happens when there are unusual circumstances. It may occur when a child is old enough to choose which parent they wish to live with (age 12 in some jurisdictions). Many people believe it is a bad idea to separate siblings, but there isn't enough good research to corroborate this.

In shared parenting, both parents share legal control of the children. Shared decision making does not mean shared time, which can vary from equal time (50/50) with each parent to 60/40 or even 65/35. With shared parenting, the children may live primarily with one parent but they may spend more time with the other parent than is normal in a non-shared parenting arrangement. The parent with whom the child lives most is called the primary residential parent and the other is called the secondary residential parent.

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In most areas, shared parenting is presumed to be the best plan for children. Judges must provide a strong reason if they wish to order some other arrangement; in some areas, judges have the authority to order shared parenting if they believe it would be best for the child, or if one parent requests it. Many judges require parents to develop a parenting plan before granting a divorce. Conflict between the parents can be minimized by a written plan stating specific dates and times when each is in charge of the child; because everything is in writing, there is less need for parents to negotiate or argue. Adherence to the plan will increase trust between the parents and encourage them to cooperate in the future.

## Guiding Questions for Parenting Plans

There are several important issues you should think about as you design your parenting plan. Ask yourself:

- 1. *What goals for our children do we both share?***
- 2. *How will we continue to be effective parents in separate households?***
- 3. *Do I only want to resolve our legal matters, or also our family issues?***
- 4. *How do we want our children to look back on this time and on our behavior as parents?***

You need to spend time talking about what goals you have for your children, what their childhood should be like, what you want them to be like both as children and adults, and what each of you can contribute to these goals. Write it down on paper and share it with your children; they'll know that you both care about them, and they'll see that you're working together for their welfare. Set an example of cooperation – even though it may be a heroic effort.

Parenting is difficult under the most ideal circumstances, and it is more of a challenge when done from two households. Plan how you will coordinate your efforts: plan for the big issues (like school, religion, etc.), and plan for the small, day-to-day stuff (such as transportation, parties, etc.). You should set up regular meetings, emails, or phone calls to catch up on important developments, work out schedules, and discuss concerns.

Your parenting plan will spell out conditions and terms – some of which can be legally enforced. Take the time to design a good, flexible plan. Someday, as young adults, your children will look back on their childhood and judge how well you both handled this difficult time. They will look at how you cooperated, and they'll remember if you put their interests ahead of your “marital issues.”

## Frequency of Contact with Each Parent

The amount of time children should spend with each parent is one of the most fought-over issues in a family break-up. It is also the most misunderstood by all involved – including parents, lawyers, and judges. As a result, parenting plans are often flawed, which can cause a great deal of emotional suffering for children.

There has been much psychology research on children's attachment to their parents, and the most recent findings are clear: children – particularly young children – need frequent and meaningful contact with both parents. A young child becomes deeply attached to both parents at a very early age; to be separated from either parent causes distress and can even cause trauma.





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Young children need frequent transitions to ensure continuity and provide comfort. This goes against what many people assume is “common sense”, and many parents, lawyers, and judges misunderstand this fact. Although quality of contact is more important than quantity, there must be enough quantity. Infants and toddlers form bonds with both parents, and extended separations put these bonds at risk over time. Fathers, especially, are likely to drop out of the child’s life. If court orders restrict the father’s access to a young child, it may cause a decline in contact with the father over time. This decline in contact can also happen with the mother.

The ideal situation for young children is to interact with both parents daily. Some interaction is functional, including meals, bedtime routines, limit-setting, discipline, and play. After age two, most children can tolerate two back-to-back overnights with one parent. Avoid long separations lasting more than five days.

Frequent contact will mean more transitions from one house to the other. Many people – including some judges – automatically assume this is bad. They assume that frequent transitions will upset a child, and should be avoided. But, there is evidence to the contrary: even a young child will get used to frequent transitions if they are not too stressful.

Unfortunately, a concept of stability – one-home, one-bed – for children still prevails. The concept has been emphasized too much in many courts, and it is to the detriment of the child’s other needs. They need strong and meaningful relationships with both parents, and most children adapt quickly to having two homes.

Research points out that less frequent transitions may cause more stress. Children must leave the home they have been in for a week or more, and they must also leave their second parent and go “home” with the prospect of not seeing the second parent for a long time. Frequent transitions between homes eliminate this problem.

## Outlining the Issues

You must discuss the parenting plan for your child, and both parents must be clear about the issues. What assumptions should you start with? Here are the major issues that most parents face:

1. ***A child needs two loving, caring, competent parents.***
2. ***Both parents have a right to an active role in their child’s development.***
3. ***Both parents must be willing to share in the tasks of parenthood.***
4. ***Conflict and competition over the children will hurt both them and you.***

Your parenting plan should be specific; this way, everyone is clear about what will happen and when. Here are some reasons to be as specific as possible:

1. ***Children need predictability.***
2. ***Parents will experience less conflict if plans are specific.***
3. ***It is easier to recognize when a plan needs to be modified when its terms are clearly spelled out in detail.***
4. ***The time and energy of the courts and lawyers will be better used if a plan is specific. It will result in fewer phone calls in the middle of the night, and fewer court filings.***

Finally, recognize that no plan is perfect, and most plans need to change over time as children develop and their lives and needs change.



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## Flexibility Is Essential

Although parenting plans need to be specific to minimize conflict and misunderstandings, be aware that situations – and people – change over time. For most families, anger diminishes over time. Parents usually remarry or re-couple, and stepchildren may enter the picture. And, of course, your own children will age and mature. Their interests will change, and the need for parent input in their lives will also change.

A parenting plan should not be carved in stone. It is not an unchanging document, and you should be prepared to modify it over time. The truly wise mother and father can sometimes anticipate some future changes, which could be built into the original court decree. However, few of us are able to predict the future, so be prepared to work with the other parent. You'll have to make changes when necessary, and the best way to do this is by mutual agreement.

If you cannot create a parenting plan yourselves, work with a mediator, parenting expert, or other third party. Put into your plan that you both agree to mediate before court action.

This article was adapted with permission from *What About the Children? A Simple Guide For Divorced/Separated And Divorcing Parents* (CDE, eighth edition, 2011) by Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) and Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.). Based in Athens, OH, the Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is a non-profit corporation founded in 1987 by a consortium of attorneys and psychologists. CDE is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation has on children. More information and skills to improve relationships with the co-parent and children is available at [online.divorce-education.com](http://online.divorce-education.com)

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