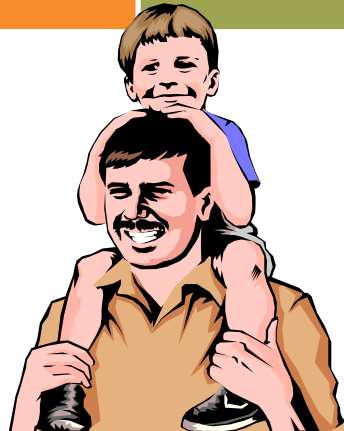


Planning for

# Shared Parenting

*A Guide for Parents Living Apart*



# Introduction

*Planning for Shared Parenting: A Guide for Parents Living Apart*, sponsored by the Massachusetts Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) with the encouragement and support of the Honorable Sean M. Dunphy, Chief Justice of the Probate and Family Court, is a collaborative effort of the legal and mental health communities. This guide combines recent developmental research about children and the impact of divorce on their lives, with the practical needs of parents and children living apart. It is the hope of the task force members that this booklet will be useful to parents, judges, lawyers, mediators, and parent educators in designing realistic, child-focused parenting plans.

I would like to thank the members of the committee, listed below, for their unflagging willingness to listen to different points of view and find ways of presenting the information acceptable to everyone. It was a privilege to preside over these stimulating discussions.

In addition to the committee members, special thanks go to Chief Justice Dunphy, Dr. Linda Cavallero, AFCC-MA President; Mary Ferriter, AFCC Treasurer; and Peter Salem, AFCC Executive Director, for their insightful comments, as well as their editorial and technical assistance.

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This booklet is dedicated to  
**Kenneth D. Herman, Ph.D., J.D.,**  
teacher, visionary, passionate champion of children.

# Shared Parenting

## *A Guide for Parents Living Apart*

One of the most difficult challenges facing parents at the time of separation is deciding how they will divide responsibility for and time with their children. Parents sometimes fear that loss of their adult relationship will also mean loss of their parent-child relationship. They are also concerned about the potential negative impact of their separation on their children's healthy development.

Thanks to the large body of research completed over the last decade, we now have a better understanding of the impact of separation and divorce on children. Using this research makes it possible to better assess and meet their needs.

### **We now know that:**

- Children do best when both parents have a stable and meaningful involvement in their children's lives.
- Each parent has different and valuable contributions to make to their children's development.
- Children should have structured, routine time as well as unstructured time with each parent.
- Parents often find that it is better for their young children to spend more time with parents and less time with third-party caregivers, taking into consideration the number of transitions and the child's need for stability. When both parents work, parents often begin planning their schedule with this in mind. A day-care provider or extended family member may be with the children most of the day, so parents should make every attempt to choose a mutually acceptable – and accessible – day-care provider.
- Parents should help their children maintain positive existing relationships, routines and activities.
- Communication and cooperation between parents are important in arranging children's activities. Consistent rules and values in both households create a sense of security for children of any age.

- Parents should allow children to bring personal items back and forth between homes, no matter who purchased them.
- Parenting plans will need to be adjusted over time as each family member's needs, schedules and circumstances change.

One of the most consistent research findings is that children are harmed when they are exposed to conflict between their parents. It is of critical importance that parents do not argue or fight when they are picking up or dropping off their children.

**When parents are unable to shield their children from their conflict, or when there are safety issues resulting from domestic violence, serious physical or mental illness, chronic neglect, chemical dependency or allegations of sexual abuse, the time-sharing plans in this booklet need to be modified.**

The information in this booklet is intended to assist parents to design time-sharing arrangements that will best meet the needs of their children. The guidelines are based upon the age of the child and the caregiving arrangements before separation. Some parents want greater involvement in their children's lives after separation. For those parents, the initial time-sharing arrangement should recognize the prior arrangements while planning for more responsibility and involvement over time.

Although this booklet is intended primarily as a guide to parents at the time of separation or the initiation of court action, it should also continue to serve as a reference as children age and circumstances change. Keep in mind that time-sharing strategies that meet the needs of infants and toddlers at separation may not be appropriate for early school-age children or adolescents.

Parents should review their parenting plan as children reach new developmental stages and whenever a significant event – such as a remarriage or relocation of a parent or the birth of a half-sibling – takes place.

Please note that although Massachusetts uses the statutory language of custodial and non-custodial parent, we prefer the designation of residential and non-residential parents except when parents share time equally.

**The essence of good parenting is to reassure children that they are loved, cared for and protected by both parents.**

## *Before Designing the Plan*

### **Family Assessment**

This booklet presents research-based information about the general needs of children at various stages of development. Since no research supports a given number of hours or days that children should spend with each parent, we have provided information about what arrangements seem to work for other co-parents. As parents, you are in the best position to determine what schedule will meet the needs of your child.

Before designing a plan for your family, you should consider your own unique situation. The Family Assessment set out below will help you develop a framework for your individualized plan. The questions following the assessment will help you focus on your child's needs.

Raising children is difficult for all parents. When parents live in separate homes the challenges are greater because relationships are more complicated. Sometimes one parent disagrees about how much time a child should spend with the other. Before planning a time-sharing arrangement for your family, it is helpful to consider:

- The age, temperament and social adjustment of each child.
- Any special needs of each child (medical, developmental, educational, emotional or social).
- The quality of relationships between siblings and any other extended family members.
- Each child's daily schedule.
- Caregiving responsibilities of each parent before the separation.
- How you would like to share responsibilities both now and in the future.
- Availability of each parent as a caregiver.
- Potential flexibility of each parent's work schedule.
- Distance between each parent's home, workplace and children's schools.

- The ability of parents to communicate and cooperate with each other.
- The ability and willingness of each parent to learn basic caregiving skills such as feeding, changing and bathing a young child; preparing a child for daycare or school; taking responsibility for helping with homework; assessing and attending to each child's special emotional and social needs.

**These considerations should remain a basic reference as children move from one developmental stage to another and as time-sharing arrangements are modified from time to time.**

Often someone who has not been an active parent prior to separation may wish to become more involved afterward. The initial parenting plan should allow that parent enough time to develop a closer relationship with the child, while at the same time recognizing the existing relationship. As the parent-child bond strengthens, changes can be made to the schedule.

## *Questions Parents Should Answer*

Before designing your plan, answering the following questions may help you focus on your family's circumstances.

- What responsibilities have each of you assumed for childcare prior to separation? For example, who has taken the children to school; helped with homework; scheduled and/or taken children to medical appointments?
- How has each of you been involved in each child's recreational activities such as sports, music, dance, or after school clubs?
- What are the most important issues for each of your children; what do you believe are their individual needs?
- What do you see as each of your strengths as a parent?
- How do you want to share parental responsibilities for your children?
- How do your children get along with each other? Should you consider spending some separate time with each of them?
- Have you thought about your children's preferences?
- What will you have to do to put your children's needs ahead of your own?

- Can you protect your children from your own conflicts, disappointments and adult concerns?
- Have you discussed with each other how and when to tell the children the details of your parenting plan?

## *Designing the Parenting Plan*

When designing your parenting plan, you should be specific about such things as:

- Who will do the driving for pick-ups and drop-offs?
- What time will holiday and vacation periods begin and end?
- How much advance notice is required for choosing vacation times?
- Who will be responsible for childcare when a child is sick and unable to go to school?
- Who will schedule routine medical and dental appointments?
- Who will be responsible for buying presents for the birthday parties to which your child will be invited?
- How will you share the responsibility for your child's birthday celebrations?
- If one parent is unavailable during that parent's scheduled time, should the other parent be offered the opportunity to be with the child?



Even if you are certain that you can work these things out as they occur, having a plan to fall back on is the best way to guard against conflict in the future.

The following information is divided into age groupings based upon developmental norms. However, parents should remember that each child must be seen as an individual. Children develop at varying speeds, depending upon many things such as individual temperament, place in the family, and outside events that affect their lives. Separation and divorce present a series of major stressors in a child's life and can cause a child to regress temporarily. If this regression happens, it may be helpful to adjust your parenting plan.



## Birth to Nine Months

### Infant

Infants learn at a rapid rate. They learn to love and trust familiar caregivers. Infants attach to parents and others through consistent, loving responses such as holding, playing, feeding, soothing, talking gently and meeting their needs promptly. They begin to respond to different approaches to parenting.

It was previously believed that infants formed a singular and exclusive attachment to one primary caregiver during the first year of life. Mental health professionals cautioned parents that disrupting this exclusive caregiver-child bond could cause lifelong adjustment problems. With this in mind, the notion of infant overnights away from the primary caregiver was rejected, without considering individual situations.

We now know that children form multiple and simultaneous attachments between six and nine months of age. In situations where *both* parents have been regularly involved with all aspects of caregiving - and the child has formed an attachment to *both* parents - the previous restrictions on overnights should be reconsidered. One objective of any parenting plan is to help children forge a meaningful relationship with both parents.

Infants should have frequent contact with both parents – and a predictable schedule and routine. Infants have a very limited capacity to remember an absent parent. However, they may have what are called emotional memories of things that are frightening to them, such as arguments between parents. Even infants can recognize anger and harsh words.

At about six months, infants begin to recognize their parents and other caregivers and within the next few months some may become uneasy around strangers. Infants trust regular caregivers to recognize their signals for food, comfort and sleep. Infants may become anxious and may experience eating and sleeping problems when they are with less familiar others.

It is important to maintain an infant's basic sleep, feeding and waking cycle. Parents' schedules should be adjusted to limit disruption to the infant's routine. In creating plans for this age group, parents should consider the special needs of breastfeeding infants.

## Designing a Plan for Infants

Visits several times weekly with non-residential parents are usually recommended for this age. These visits should provide ample opportunity for such care-giving functions as feeding, playing, bathing, soothing and putting the infant to sleep, whether for a nap or for the night. This will help non-residential parents maintain or build familiarity between themselves and the infant.



If a non-residential parent has not been involved in caregiving previously, short visits of several hours every few days will help to develop a mutually secure relationship, allowing the parent to master the tasks and sensitivity required to care for an infant. As the caregiving skills are mastered and the parent-child bond strengthens, the plan may include longer days.

Non-residential parents of children this age who have been active, involved caregivers may begin overnights, preferably in familiar surroundings. Overnights are more likely to be successful when parents have shared parental tasks prior to separation and communicate effectively about their baby.

To develop a healthy attachment to both parents, an infant should not be away from either parent for more than a few days. Many infants demonstrate a caregiver preference. Extended separation from that primary caregiver should be avoided.

Communication between the parents about the baby is essential for good infant adjustment. A daily communication log should be maintained and exchanged between the parents noting eating, sleeping, diapering and any new developments.





## *Nine to Eighteen Months*

### **Baby**

Between the ages of nine and eighteen months, the transition from infant to toddler gradually takes place. There is great and rapid skill development, including motor accomplishments (crawling, standing and walking), communication from sounds and smiles to simple words, and beginning expressions of simple emotions (hugs, kisses, anger, fear and anxiety).

Predictability and consistency remain important. Babies can respond to multiple nurturing caregivers if there is sensitivity to their cues and needs, and regularity in their waking, eating, and sleeping schedules. Babies may continue to express fear and anxiety if a familiar caregiver is not there to comfort them.

### *Designing a Plan for this Age*

It is important for each parent to have the opportunity to:

- Participate in daily routines such as feeding, bathing, napping, playing.
- Have frequent contact with the child. Separations of more than three or four days from either parent will interfere with a healthy attachment to that parent.
- Establish similar routines in each home by creating a communication log to be shared between the parents that describes the child's daily experience.

If a parent has not been involved in caregiving previously, frequent short visits several times weekly will help to develop a mutually secure relationship and allow the parent to master the tasks required in caring for a baby. Daytime visits may be lengthened gradually, and overnights added as the parent and child develop a stronger bond and the parent is comfortably able to attend to feeding, bathing, diapering, soothing and bedtime needs.

When both parents are working outside the home and a child is with a third-party caregiver during the workday, many parents split the weekend and consider an additional one or two overnights with the non-residential parent during the week as well as other mid-week contact. Although this is quite workable if the non-residential parent was "hands on" with childcare when they lived together, parents should remain sensitive to the child's response to several caregivers and multiple transitions.

If both parents participated in all aspects of childcare on a reasonably consistent basis before the separation, the plan should allow for shared parenting to continue.



## *Eighteen to Thirty-six Months*

### **Toddler**

The period from eighteen months to three years is one of rapid physical, emotional and social change. Toddlers are becoming more aware of the world around them. They may have formed attachments to many caregivers (i.e. parents, grandparents, daycare providers, close family friends). They are beginning to trust that their caregivers will meet their physical and emotional needs. Toddlers can respond to different parenting styles. They are becoming more independent and are developing the ability to comfort themselves (i.e. favorite blanket or toy or thumbsucking).

Healthy children of this age are “full of themselves” and may express their independence by saying “No” to requests and demands. Some children at this age may become fearful of separations, so that transitions between homes may be difficult. Some children may cling to a parent or cry at the separation from one or both parents. Resistance to exchanges is normal for many children. This behavior does not necessarily mean that the other parent is not a good parent or that the child does not want to be with one parent or the other.

If parents share driving, it is sometimes easier for children if the parent they are with drops them off to the other parent. This avoids interrupting ongoing activities that sometimes occur when a parent comes to pick up the child, and it signals parental support for the transition. Predictable schedules and supporting the relationship with the other parent can make exchanges easier. Toddlers are particularly sensitive to tension, anger and violence in the parental relationship.

### *Designing a Plan for Toddlers*

It is important that each parent have the opportunity to become competent and comfortable in all aspects of the child’s daily routine. This includes bathing, feeding, napping, playing, reading, and arranging age-appropriate activities with other children. Parents with a child of this age should consider:

- The amount of childcare that each parent provided before separation as well as the child’s temperament.
- If a parent was not regularly involved in caregiving, two to three daytime contacts weekly with the non-residential parent allows the parent-child bond to develop and strengthen as caregiving skills are mastered. The addition of an overnight visit may be planned after a short time if the child does not show signs of undue stress.
- It is preferable to begin with overnights spaced throughout the week, particularly if dealing with an only child.

- If both parents were involved in every aspect of childcare before the separation, the child should be able to be away from either parent for two or three days. Depending upon the child's temperament, parenting may be shared on a reasonably equal basis.
- Daily telephone contact at a regular hour may be reassuring to both the child and the absent parent.
- Keeping a picture of the absent parent with the child in the child's room.

**Children at this age do not have an adult's concept of time. Frequent contact helps the parent and child establish and maintain a mutually supportive relationship.**





## Three to Five Years

### Pre-School

Children in the pre-school years experience a tremendous number of developmental changes. It is important that parents of pre-schoolers adjust parenting styles to accommodate their children's new development, while keeping in mind that pre-schoolers continue to require guidance and support.

Three to five year olds think they are the center of the universe and therefore often feel they are responsible for the divorce. They may say what they believe the parent wants to hear. It is important to remember that this does not necessarily reflect the child's real experience. If the child reports parental behavior that causes concern, discuss the matter with the other parent. In many instances, the child may have misunderstood what happened and talking to the other parent may resolve the issue.

Pre-schoolers tend to be impulsive and very concrete in their thinking. Nightmares are normal at this age as children become able to imagine frightening things, but have difficulty coping with their fears.

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 their parents' homes. They may become upset, yet once there become settled and happy in the other parent's home. Children will do better if each parent can display a positive attitude during transitions and give some advance notice of any anticipated changes.

Children of this age can benefit from structured time with children of their own age, away from their parents. Children are beginning to understand days and weeks, but not time.

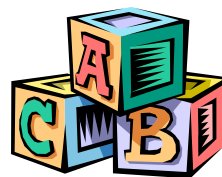
Pre-schoolers continue to need consistency and predictability. They may be changing their naptime or giving up naps altogether and parents must communicate about and take into account their child's changing sleep schedule.



## *Designing a Plan for Pre-Schoolers*

When planning the amount of time and the number of consecutive overnights the child will spend with each parent, parents should consider:

- The amount of childcare each of the parents provided prior to separation.
- The child's temperament.
- The level of conflict between parents.
- Familiarity with the other parent's home.



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 and caregiving skills to develop. As the child becomes more comfortable moving between two homes, additional time and one or two overnights may be added.

If both parents are working outside the home at the time of separation and the child is in day care, parents might consider splitting each weekend so the child has one full stay-at-home day and overnight with each parent every week, as well as some weekday contact. While this may not be the best solution for the parents, it is helpful to many young children in the early stages of separation.

If one parent is primarily at home with the child, the parenting plan may offer the other parent more weekend time, in addition to some weekday contact.

Some parents find that an every-other-weekend schedule with midweek contact works well. As the child moves through this developmental stage, weekends may be extended to include either Friday or Sunday night or both.

When both parents have been actively involved in the child's daily routine, depending on the child's temperament and adjustment, ease of transitions and the effectiveness of parental communication, reasonably equal time may be considered.



## *Six to Nine Years*

### **Early School**

This period begins the long, usually more settled, middle years of childhood. Children have greater experience with multiple separations from parents (e.g. school, relatives, friends, sports). During this stage, children begin to:

- Develop peer and community relationships.
- Attain self-esteem as they develop personal and social skills.
- Develop empathy and a sense of right and wrong.

Early school-age children understand the concepts of time and routine. They can be more independent than their younger peers and more secure with the idea of two residences. They usually can adjust to different parenting styles. This and the next age period are typically the most flexible years of development, which permits parents to be more creative in preparing parenting plans. Using a calendar to inform and remind children of the schedules outlined in the parenting plan, along with their other activities, is very helpful, as changes can be anticipated and talked about ahead of time, easing some of the stress of transitions.

### *Designing a Plan for this Age*

At this age, it is important to maximize frequent contact with both parents. Depending upon each family's circumstances – for example, parenting responsibilities assumed by each parent prior to separation, geographical distance, parents' work commitments, child's activities, child's temperament and adjustment, and level of conflict between parents – the plan might include:

- One to three or sometimes four overnights a week with the non-residential parent with the understanding that some children still require a home base while others do well alternating or splitting weeks.
- Alternate weekends with an evening during the week. The weekend could include one, two or three overnights depending upon the level of involvement with pre-separation parenting.
- Weekday overnights so that the non-residential parent can fully participate in the child's schooling. Research shows that children with fathers involved in their schooling perform better in school.



The child's social activities and commitments should be given priority whenever possible. Parents need to support the child's participation in activities and the development of relationships outside the family. Children at the older end of this group may want to have input into the parenting plan. Although their views should be considered, parents still make the decisions. Children should be given the opportunity and privacy to call the other parent.

Parents should try to limit the number of transitions between households. It is important to maintain consistency so children can reasonably rely on being with each parent on the same day of the week. For example, children may be with one parent on Monday and Tuesday night and the other parent on Wednesday and Thursday night with weekends alternating. This will allow children to feel secure in making plans with their peers and parents to be consistent in their responsibilities for participation in their children's activities.







## Ten to Twelve Years

### Later School Age

This period is also known as the “pre-teen years,” as these children are preparing to make the leap into puberty and adolescence. They have a greater capacity to understand time, to appreciate future plans and schedules, and to balance different values and parental practices that might exist in their two residences. Children this age tend to be rule bound and may align themselves with one parent. *If your child refuses to see the other parent, you should seek assistance from a professional family counselor.*

Ten to twelve year olds should be encouraged to engage in a variety of activities outside the home. Such participation helps children develop social and intellectual skills in preparation for the greater independence and demands of adolescence. Parents should allow their children to express feelings about the need for greater control over their own time while making it clear that parents make the final decisions. Balancing time with parents, friends and activities requires flexibility and commitment to maintaining a strong relationship with both parents. Parental support of increased independence will contribute to the child’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

### Designing a Plan for This Age

- School-age children can do well with many different parenting plans as long as they provide for frequent contact with both parents.
- Where possible, plans should include overnights during the week and on weekends.
- Some options include alternating weekends with three or four overnights, split weeks or alternating weeks.
- Children should be given the opportunity and privacy to call the other parent.
- Children’s preferences should be considered and respected. Remember that parents should still make the final decision.
- It is important to accommodate the child’s social activities and commitments.



## *Thirteen to Fifteen Years*

### **Early Adolescents**

Children between thirteen and fifteen continue to use the family as a base of support and guidance. Decision-making abilities vary widely among adolescents as well as from one situation to another. Though they may not show it, young adolescents continue to need the nurturing and oversight of their parents. The primary developmental task for children this age is one of increasing independence from the family and the emergence of an identity of a separate self. Girls usually mature earlier than boys.

Children of this age should be encouraged to explore activities and develop social relationships outside the family. These outside interests often compete with the scheduled parenting plan. Teens will often prefer to spend time with peers over parents and can become resentful and angry if their wishes are not respected. The challenge for parents of these early adolescents is to support their growing independence while maintaining some basic structure and close contact with both parents.

It is appropriate for children of this age to begin to negotiate their time directly with each parent. It is of paramount importance for parents to talk directly with each other to be certain that the child is safe and accountable. Parents should support the relationship of the child with the other parent.

### *Designing a Plan for This Age*

Parents of these early adolescents should consider the child's schedule and commitments, distance between the parents' homes, each parent's work schedule or other obligations, the child's temperament and wishes, and recognition of a teen's need for unstructured time.

Although many different plans may work for children of this age, some options include:

- Alternating seven-day periods with or without mid-week time.
- Alternating long weekends with or without mid-week time.
- Providing a home base for the child with some time with the non-residential parent during the week and on weekends.

This is a time when children may articulate a desire for a home base because of the growing importance of their own network and outside activities. Both parents can increase contact through regular attendance at the child's athletic, performance, academic or other activities. This allows for maximum parental involvement in activities important in the child's life.



## *Sixteen to Eighteen Years*

### **Late Adolescents**

Parents of sixteen to eighteen year olds should encourage and support their child's:

- Gradual and healthy separation from both parents.
- Development of an individual identity.
- Establishing a sense of self with regard to rules and regulations of society, school and peer groups.
- Understanding of sexual and other feelings in context of relationships.

## *Designing a Plan for This Age*

Children of this age do well with many different plan models. For these late adolescents, communication between parents remains essential, especially regarding curfews, driving, dating and overnights away from both homes.

This is a time when children are particularly vulnerable to changes within the family and to pressure from outside the family. Maintaining stability and consistency can be challenging as an adolescent's feelings are often changeable and intense. Increased schoolwork, extracurricular activities, jobs, peer relationships, and sports are often more important than time with family or either parent. As they move through this stage, many teenagers become focused on future goals such as education, work or other post-high-school plans.

While the sixteen to eighteen year old appears to be struggling to become independent, there is still a need for consistency, support and meaningful time with both parents. Parents should be aware of a teenager's need to be consulted, informed and involved when making plans without giving up the adult/child relationship and the structure that can only be provided by both parents. Parents should remain flexible while maintaining age-appropriate controls.



## Holidays

Holiday schedules generally take precedence over regularly scheduled parenting time.

The major holidays should be defined by both parents and alternated or shared with consideration to prior family traditions and religious beliefs, especially in the first year of separation. Whenever possible, children should continue celebrating particular holidays with extended family where this has been the prior custom. The location of both parents and their respective families should be considered in determining how holidays should be shared.

Many parents provide for the civil holidays that are celebrated on Mondays by having the child remain with whichever parent has the child for that weekend. This generally works out equitably except in cases where the child is scheduled to be with the same parent every Monday.



## Vacations

Children benefit from extended uninterrupted vacation time with each parent consistent with their abilities to handle separation from either parent. The length of time for each vacation period is dependent upon the age and temperament of the children, the geographic location of the vacation, the extent of shared parenting, and the availability of the parents.

Once overnights away from the home base have been successfully established, longer vacation time may be implemented. Vacation time for children less than eighteen months should be consistent with the child's ability to tolerate extended separations from either parent. Initially, infant vacation time should not exceed three consecutive overnights with either parent. As a child matures, both parents should have the same opportunities to vacation with their child. Many parents provide for two uninterrupted vacation weeks for children at about six years of age, increasing to four weeks by age ten. Whether or not these weeks are consecutive depends upon the circumstances of the family.

- To avoid undue stress on the child, parents should plan down time for their child after travel and before they return to school.
- In planning vacations, parents should not take their children out of school except in special circumstances and when both parents agree.

## *Vacations (cont.)*

- Plans for vacations, holidays or other special occasions should be agreed to as early as possible to avoid last-minute conflict. Parents should establish specific dates for advance notification of summer vacation choices.
- Consideration should be given to the relationship between vacation, holiday and regularly scheduled time. Is a two week vacation intended to be fourteen days? If a two week vacation involves two weekends, should an alternating weekend plan begin with the non-vacationing parent on the following weekend to avoid three or more back to back weekends with either parent?
- Parents should not plan a vacation to conflict with the other parent's scheduled holiday (i.e. July 4 or Labor Day) unless they agree.
- The vacationing parent should provide the other parent with full contact information prior to leaving home.
- Arrangements should be made for reasonable telephone contact between the child and the non-vacationing parent, particularly with younger children.





## Conclusion

### Positive Parenting

Co-parenting after separation presents many challenges. It is not easy to put your children's needs ahead of your own often intense feelings and fears. Referring to the following parenting tips from time to time may help you master successful co-parenting.

#### **Children benefit when parents:**

- Communicate with each other in a courteous “businesslike” manner.
- Are on time and have children ready at exchange time.
- Avoid any communication that may lead to conflict at exchange time.
- Encourage the children to carry “important” items such as clothing, toys and security blankets with them between the parents’ homes.
- Follow reasonably similar routines for mealtime, bedtime and homework time.
- Communicate about rules and discipline in order to handle them in similar ways.
- Support contact with grandparents and other extended family so the children do not experience a sense of loss.
- Are flexible in developing parenting plans to accommodate their child’s extracurricular activities and special family celebrations.
- Make time to spend alone with their children when the parent has a new partner.
- Are with their children during scheduled times and communicate with their children when they cannot be with them.
- Respect the other parent’s scheduled times with children and do not schedule plans that will conflict.
- Discuss any proposed schedule changes directly with the other parent.
- Support the child’s relationship with the other parent and trust the other’s parenting skills.
- Assure the children that they did not cause the divorce and that they do not have the power to reverse the process.

## **Children are harmed when parents:**

- Encourage children to choose between them.
- Make promises they do not keep.
- Criticize the other parent to the child or in the child's range of hearing.
- Use the child as a messenger or negotiator or seek information about the other parent from the child.
- Withhold access to the child for any reason unless there are safety concerns.
- Involve the child in the court process or share legal information.
- Introduce a new partner without adequate preparation. Remember that children need time to grieve the loss of family as they knew it and may not be ready to accept a new partner.

Parents should remember that a child's experience of divorce differs from their own. A child can often benefit from participation in school-based groups for children of divorce. Some children have greater difficulty in adjusting to their parents' separation. If your child exhibits troublesome behavior over time, consider seeking help from a specialist experienced in dealing with child development and divorce.

It may be helpful to refer to the information you received at the Parent Education Program. Many helpful age-appropriate books have been written to help you and your children through this difficult time. Your local bookstore and library are wonderful resources.