

Sample Parenting Access Plans

To Parents

Raising children presents challenges for all parents. When parents live in separate homes the challenges are greater because the relationships become more complicated. Sometimes parents disagree about how much time children should spend with each of them. The following information will help parents reach agreements about parenting time (access) with their children.

These plans were developed by a committee of judicial officers, mental health providers and attorneys in Maricopa County, Arizona, who consulted with nationally known experts in child development. The Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children selected these plans after an extensive review of materials prepared in communities around the country and the world. These plans offer information about what children learn, feel and need at different ages. They also provide a variety plans appropriate for each age group, and language that may be included in court orders.

Children describe the loss of contact with a parent as the worst consequence of divorce or parental separation. Unless special circumstances exist, preserving a healthy and on-going relationship between children and both their parents after divorce, dissolution or separation is of utmost importance. Positive involvement with both parents furthers the child's emotional and social development, academic achievement, and overall adjustment.

Why Plans Are Necessary

Written parenting access plans provide children and parents with some assurances of maintaining meaningful contact and can prevent future conflict. These plans are intended to encourage open dialog and cooperation between parents. The Courts prefer that parents reach agreements about schedules voluntarily. When parents reach agreements about schedules on their own, they are more likely to remain cooperative as their children grow up. Children do best when parents cooperate. The reverse is also true. Children who experience on-going conflict between parents are at high risk for suffering serious long-term emotional problems.

Parents must state their agreements about parenting time in their parenting access plan. A successful parenting access plan will state the agreements parents reach about parenting time, and the sharing of parenting functions and responsibilities. The schedule should consider each child's developmental needs as identified in this booklet.

How To Use This Booklet

1. Locate plans for your child(ren's) age.
2. Meet with your child's other parent to discuss parenting time and which plan for access (A, B or C) best suits your family's needs.
3. To assist you, the plans include sample calendars with sample parenting access plan language to include in court orders. These are examples only. You may chose any days or times you wish.
4. Because each child is unique, you may wish to establish different plans for children of different ages while making sure that brothers and sisters are able to spend as much time together as possible. Be flexible!

Which Plan Should We Choose?

The following options are designed to allow parents, or the Court if necessary, to select the proper plan after considering the family's unique circumstances. Children differ in how long they are comfortable being away from each parent. Some children prefer spending more time at one home, while others move back and forth on a regular basis with ease. Parents may need to tolerate disruption of their own schedule, and more or less time with their child than they might otherwise prefer to provide the children with a sense of security and well-being.

When creating a plan, parents should consider the child's relationship with each parent. If a parent has never been a part of a child's life or has not had contact with the child for an extended period, access should start slowly and gradually increase as the child adjusts and feels comfortable.

A parent who has an extremely busy work schedule, has not been the child's primary caregiver, or wants regular access without extensive care giving responsibility may consider **Plan A**.

A parent who has been involved in the day-to-day care of the child may desire greater access. This parent may consider **Plan B**.

A parent who has care giving experience and desires maximum access may consider **Plan C**.

As the child adjusts to the initial plan and feels comfortable, parents may consider increasing access by creating another plan. In some cases, it may be beneficial to change from one plan to another as the child gets older. When increasing access time, a parent's past involvement in caring for the child must be considered as well as the parent's willingness and ability to learn necessary care giving skills.

If parents cannot create a parenting access plan and access schedule that is best for their family, the Court will evaluate the case, and create a parenting access plan that it finds is in the best interest of the children.

Important Factors To Consider When Creating A Plan

- the child's age, maturity, temperament and strength of attachment to each parent
- any special needs of the child and parents
- the child's relationships with siblings and friends
- the distance between the two households
- the flexibility of both parents work schedules and the child's schedule to accommodate extended access
- childcare arrangements
- transportation needs
- the ability of parents to communicate and cooperate
- the child's and the parents' cultural and religious practices
- a parent's willingness to provide adequate supervision even if the parent has not done so in the past
- a parent's ability and willingness to learn basic care giving skills such as feeding, changing, and bathing a young child, preparing a child for daycare or school, or taking responsibility for helping a child with homework
- a parent's ability to care for the child's needs

Children Benefit When Parents

- initiate the child's contact with the other parent on a regular basis by phone, letter, audio and videotapes, e-mail and other forms of communication
- maintain predictable schedules
- are prompt and have children ready at exchange time
- avoid any communication that may lead to conflict at exchange time
- ensure smooth transitions by assuring the children that they support their relationship with the other parent and trust the other's parenting skills
- allow the children to carry "important" items such as clothing, toys, security blankets with them between the parents homes
- follow similar routines for mealtime, bedtime, and homework time
- handle rules and discipline in similar ways
- support contact with grandparents and other extended family so the children do not experience a sense of loss
- are flexible so the child can take advantage of opportunities to participate in special family celebrations or events
- give as much advance notice as possible to the other parent about special occasions
- provide an itinerary of travel dates, destination, and places where the child or parent can be reached when on vacation
- establish a workable, "business-like" method of communication
- plan their vacations around the child's regularly scheduled activities

Children Are Harmed When Parents

- make their child choose between mom and dad
- question their child about the other parent's activities or relationships
- make promises they do not keep
- argue with or put down the other parent in the child's presence or range of hearing
- discuss their personal problems with the child or in the child's range of hearing
- use the child as a messenger, spy or mediator
- withhold access because child support has not been paid

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

These sample plans may not apply to all family situations or all children. They are not appropriate if there are significant issues of:

- child abuse or neglect
- serious mental or emotional disorders
- drug or alcohol abuse or criminal activity
- domestic violence
- continuous levels of very intense conflict

When a child's physical or emotional safety is at risk, it is necessary to protect the child. Parents who have concerns about these issues should seek help from an attorney, mental health professional, court services, domestic abuse agency, or local social services agency.

Remember, the welfare of the child is of utmost importance.

Definitions of terms used in this booklet:

Attachment: the process of building strong emotional bonds to specific care givers, critical for the child's development during the first year. A sense of security, the development of trust in others and positive emotional and social adjustment occur as a result of attachment.

Bonding: the development of close, loving and trusting relationships.

Parenting access plan: means a plan for the parenting of a minor child, which provides for the allocation of parenting functions and responsibilities.

Transition: moving between parents' homes.