

Critical Issues for Consideration when Developing Practical Parenting Plans
For Families in Conflict:
A Working Guide

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Thank you to the other professionals who have contributed to the development of this guide through consultation with our ad hoc committee .

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Introduction

Preamble:

Family breakup and divorce is a potentially disorganizing and very challenging event in the lives of children and parents. This is more profoundly so in families where parents are in high conflict or have the potential to become embroiled in intense disagreements regarding the subsequent parenting of their children. In order to limit the impact of the dissention on the children, it is critical to consider many issues in the development of the parenting plans and agreements that will subsequently govern the responsibilities exercised by parents in the rearing of their children.

Generally, the paramount guideline is to vary the specificity used in parenting plans depending on factors such as:

1. Level of conflict – as conflict increases and parents cannot effectively communicate about even mundane issues, more issues need to be anticipated and addressed in the parenting plan and more specificity is required about each individual issue
2. Age of child – parenting plans regarding preadolescent children often require more specificity than do those affecting adolescent children.

In high conflict families, often the essential goal is to develop parallel parenting times so parents do not have to negotiate, work out details, or place the child in the middle of their conflict. Such arrangements create a more peaceful environment for the child who can in turn devote energies to learning, playing, relating to family and friends, and basically to being a less worried child rather than to monitoring parents' reactions and fretting about the possibility that parents might interact in a negative, hostile, and even physically aggressive manner. Also, the child can then surrender the tasks of pacifying parents, telling each what he or she wishes to hear, and/or taking over responsibilities for emotional nurturance and caretaking.

In a general sense, parents need to remember that children are constantly developing and changing and that as they get older, they can have increasing input into decisions that concern them. This begins when they are very young and make such mundane choices as to what cereal to eat for breakfast or what socks to wear. In families where parents do not live together, some young children might make decisions about what toys or items of clothing they take between homes. By the age of seven or eight years, they may be able to contribute to such decisions as birthday party planning and choice of extracurricular activities within specified parameters, such as a time or financial budgets. By some point in their teenage years when children have achieved mature thought and can consider the options and the consequences of their actions, they might have major input into the structure of their living arrangements. At the same time, there are no firm guidelines about the ages at which children are capable of these increasingly significant decisions and parents must be sure to not over empower children in the decision-making process. To do so prematurely subjects them to lobbying from parents and puts them in the stressful and untenable position of choosing between the two most important people in their lives. Given these considerations, clearly any parenting plan should be a living document that adapts to the children's ages and capacities. Consequently, parents will somehow need to establish a way to have some ongoing dialogue throughout the children's growing years so appropriate adaptations to parenting plans are possible.

Basic Definitions:

In many parenting plans and court orders today, parents share guardianship of their children. This generally means that both parents legally have input into the major decisions about the children's lives, such as in regards to education, religion, medical care, extracurricular activities, relationships with extended family members and friends, and travel opportunities. Even in high conflict situations, joint responsibility is often the norm. Also, parents usually share parenting time for their children using various previously agreed-upon schedules. During each person's parenting time, that parent normally makes the day-to-day parenting decisions regarding the child.

Parents also need to distinguish among parenting styles, preferences, and true safety issues. A parenting style is essentially the routine approach that a parent uses in interacting with, managing demands, and disciplining a child. Most parents have a strong preference that others respond to and parent their child in a similar manner, given that they believe this is best for the child. A particular child's parents may very well differ in their beliefs and styles of parenting. Children often can adapt to differences in parenting styles between the two homes and in reality, there is no one right way to parent. For example, a child will not be irreparably harmed if he or she is has regular formal meals at a table or eats more informally. Differences in such expectations and routines become problematic when they affect the child's daily functioning. Safety issues are non negotiable, given that a child may become at risk for harm or neglect.

It is not uncommon to find parenting plans and formal court orders for shared parenting with joint decision making in high-conflict families. Such arrangements only more strongly emphasize the need for increased specificity in the orders and parenting plans that are made about children so as to eliminate points of contention and conflict.

Use of this Guide:

This document is intended to be a guide for parents who are in the process of establishing parenting plans. It reviews a number of critical issues for consideration as parents begin to make parenting plans that truly address their children's needs. Personal review of these issues is important prior to entry into negotiations, but this guide might also be used during actual negotiation process. Use of the guide is likely to be of particular value in families where parents are in high conflict over the parenting arrangements for their children. Also, portions may also be a useful reference when parents are in the process of updating a parenting plan developed when their children were much younger.

Finally parents should note that although this guide does not address the negotiation of child support arrangements, given that legal guidelines for these determinations exist, some of the issues discussed below may very well impact on the monetary arrangements that exist between parents.

Who Developed this Guide:

This guide evolved from the close collaboration of various professionals who have extensive experience in helping families evolve parenting plans for their children and who support children and families in the aftermath of family separation. Not only did seasoned psychologists, counselors, lawyers, and mediators participate in the development of this document, but they consulted with educators, physicians, parents, and others who experienced the distrust and dissention either first-hand or in their contacts with separating families.

Parenting Schedules

Parents have many options when they develop day-to-day parenting schedules for their children. In this process, parents may want to consider:

- Parental abilities to be available for parenting on predictable and reliable basis
- Parental employment schedules
- Ages and developmental needs of the children
- School schedules
- Proximity of parents' homes to each other and to school, child care providers, and extracurricular activities
- Parental capacities to communicate with each other
- Children's capacities to manage change, including the limitation of transitions to minimize stress on the child
- Capacity of families to flexibly alter arrangements without generating conflict
- The need to evolve and change parenting plans as children grow and family circumstances change.
- Setting predictable transfer days and parenting times so both parents and children can make plans

Clarification of terminology

Parents need to make sure they understand the terms they are using in the negotiating process. For example, many confuse a co-parenting plan with a parallel parenting plan. The first requires continuous, open, and flexible communication between parents regarding many issues. Parents verbally negotiate ongoing changes to their plan as required. In a parallel parenting situation, a detailed parenting plan is in place that entails minimal contact and communication between parents. The plan is rigid and changes, if any, are effected through a formal negotiation process.

Common examples of parenting schedules

Parents can structure their day-to-day parenting schedules in many ways and do not need to be bound by traditional arrangements. For example, children only "visited" with their fathers every second weekend in previous years, thereby limiting children's opportunities to be raised by both parents. Although some parents still choose to implement such a plan, many other options exist that allow parents to share parenting responsibilities and opportunities, with scheduling patterns often revolving around a fourteen-day repeating schedule. The following are a sampling of possibilities:

Alternating block times on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis.

Nine day/five day schedules, with or without contact in the nine-day stretch. The five-day parenting period often extends from Thursday to Tuesday, or Thursday to Monday if a mid-week contact is planned.

Three weekends of parenting by one parent a month with the child spending the remainder of the time with the other parent.

Two, two, five, five-day schedule (2-2-5-5) – parenting times alternate through Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, Friday to Tuesday, Wednesday to Sunday – This schedule allows for both weekday and weekend parenting periods for each parent, eliminating longer absences of the child from either parent that may be particularly problematic for younger children.

Schedules that follow predictable work shifts for parents. For example, firefighters, police officers, and nurses may have schedules that are known for weeks or months in advance.

Later variations in parenting schedules

While developing a parenting plan, parents may wish to consider the possibility that plans will need to be later adapted and changed. For example, teenagers may wish to vary their childhood schedules as social, employment, and school factors shift. Also, families may relocate for a number of reasons. Such adaptations may be more manageable if parents consider this possibility initially. Thus, regardless of the reason for relocation, parents may want to develop a plan about how arrangements would change.

Communication Issues

Regardless of whether families are intact or separated, all parents must communicate with each other about their children. In high-conflict families, such communications are often difficult and may inflame the conflict rather than settle it. Consequently, it is often desirable to limit communication between parents as much as possible. Even so, and despite the use of sufficiently detailed parenting plans, some communication is occasionally necessary and may be optimally structured by considering the following issues.

Types of information that can be exchanged directly between parents without the presence of a third party, such as in mediation or another process of alternate dispute resolution:

- Medical emergencies, such as emergency visits or admissions to hospital
- Significant medical or dental issues, such as
 - medications
 - referrals to specialists
- Significant issues with the child's behavior or discipline, such as:
 - police involvement with the child
 - disappearance of the child
- New and significant school issues, such as:
 - referral to special programming
 - truancy
 - suspensions
- Minor adjustments in plans, excepting when the adjustment becomes point of contention between parents

Types of information not to be exchanged or discussed directly between parents without the presence of a third party, such as in mediation or another process of alternate dispute resolution:

- Major changes in parenting plans
- Criticism of the other parent's parenting style and parenting decisions, such as:
 - structuring of homework
 - eating in front of the television
- Issues from the past marital relationship

Frequency of direct information exchange between parents :

- Does the parenting plan need to be structured in a way that specifies parents are to communicate directly only in emergency situations?
- Are parents able to communicate directly about more than the critical information outlined above without the involvement of a third party?
- Can parents work towards scheduling a regular time for communication, such as once a month or once weekly?
- How should a parent respond if the other parent is communicating overly frequently, such as daily or many times during a single day?

How the communication occurs:

How do parents plan to exchange information, such as:

- in person
- by telephone
- by letter
- by e-mail

Is e-mail the preferred method of communication, given it allows for a written record that automatically records the time of the message and the identity of the sender?

Is voice mail, text messaging, and caller ID recording of conversations acceptable if agreed upon by both parents?

Do parents need to consider having communications copied to neutral parties on each side to reduce the negativity in them?

If the use of e-mail is the established mode of preferred communication, when will a telephone call be required?

Is face-to-face discussion between parents acceptable or will parents eliminate this possibility if they establish transfer protocols that do not permit any physical proximity between them, except perhaps in the situations that involve very young children?

If face-to-face communication is planned, what steps can parents take to ensure that the child witnesses only civil and matter-of-fact communication between parents rather than spiteful and negative exchanges that impact very negatively on the child?

Time frames for responding to communications from the other parent:

Excepting emergency communication by telephone, do parents need to mutually specify the time within which the other parent must reply to a communication, such as 24 hours or 48 hours? This may depend upon various factors, such as the frequency with which parents access their messaging system.

Educational Issues

Enrollment:

- Who decides what school the child will attend?
- Under what name will the child be registered?
- What last name will the child use on a daily basis in the classroom?
- Who will complete the yearly registration forms?
- Who designates the people to be contacted in the case of an emergency?
- Is the school to contact the other parent first in the case of an emergency?
- How will double registrations be avoided?
- Under what conditions will a change in schools be warranted?
- If the children must change schools, how will parents divide responsibilities for enrollment and cost?

Values:

Given that parents may have divergent values regarding the importance of various aspects of the school experience and that children may very well flounder when parents are not equally supporting certain aspects of their education, do parents need to specify a common statement of values regarding educational issues, such as:

- need to attend neighborhood or local school
- need to attend on a daily basis or acceptance of absences for holidays and other activities
- required daily homework, such as none or a minimal or significant amount

Do parents need to specify strategies each will employ so as to support the child to function in agreement with their mutually agreed-upon values?

Costs:

- Who pays the basic school fees?
- Who pays extra costs, such as:
 - materials – calculators, books, lost books, supplies
 - field trips'
 - pizza days, etc.
 - gym strip
 - sports equipment, mouth guards
 - CTS
 - glasses

- Who pays for lost or broken belongings, such as:
 - shoes,
 - glasses
 - orthodontic appliances
 - mouth guards
 - gym strip

Transportation:

- Where will the bus pick-up and drop-off location be located?
- Who pays for transportation costs?
- Who besides the parents is allowed to pick up or drop off the child, e.g. grandmother, new partner, nanny, neighbor, parent of child's friend?

Special Educational Needs:

- Who signs consents for assessment procedures?
e.g. psychology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy
- Who contributes to developing the Individual Program Plan (IPP) and who has the authority to sign it?
- Who consents to placement in a special class, program, or school and does the short or long-term nature of the placement alter this?
- What mechanism will be used if parents disagree about the assessments and/or interventions?
- Who pays for the fees and extra transportation costs of such programming?
- Who decides if the child needs extra services such as tutoring, and who takes the child to these sessions and pays for them?

Changeovers in Parenting Times:

- What is the actual time of day that the transfer of parenting responsibility occurs?
e.g. 8:30 a.m., 3:00 p.m.
- Which parent is responsible during the child's school day on a transfer day?
- Who is to be called if the child is ill, hurt, or otherwise must leave the school setting on a changeover day?
- Who is responsible for provision of care on a professional day, early dismissal day, or day during which school is cancelled, e.g. snow day, water main break?
- Can the parent who is not the designated parent on a particular school day take the child out of school to attend various appointments and who books such appointments?
- Can the parent who is not the designated parent on a particular school day take the child out of for lunch or come to the school to eat lunch with the child on school property?
- Can either parent take children out of school early or return them late from weekends or holiday periods?
- Is there a designated maximum amount of time that children can miss school for such optional activities as holiday travel?

Transfers of Materials:

- How are transfers of clothing and materials to be handled between homes if these are indeed transferred during changeovers from one parent's care to that of the other?
- Should the child take only school materials along if the transfer is to occur at school and how might other belongings be transferred if this is indeed necessary?

What happens if needed possessions are forgotten in one home and must be retrieved after the child has transferred to other parent's care?

Children with Organizational Difficulties:

What special considerations may be needed to manage issues such as homework, assignments and projects, notices, and materials?

Do arrangements need to be made to allow the child to e-mail work projects to a home account to permit continued work on them without the possibility of loss or misplacement between school and either of their homes?

Communication Between Home and School:

Who receives the report card, school newsletter, and other notices?

Are duplicate copies of notices and newsletters available for both parents?

Does each parent assume responsibility for making arrangements with the school to receive copies of such information or is one parent responsible for making copies of all of this information for the other? Note: the first alternative may be the better option in high-conflict situations.

Who signs the report card?

How will school picture orders be managed?

How will book orders be managed?

Who attends the parent-teacher interviews?

Must parents attend parent-interviews together or can they book two separate interviews or must they alternate attending parent-teacher interviews?

Can a parent bring a new partner, neighbor, relative, or friend to the parent-teacher interviews?

How are situations handled where information is sent to one parent that must be followed up by the other during their parenting time, such as:

baking cookies for a special day

providing snacks for a kindergarten or playschool class

preparing child for a wild hair day, weird hat day, etc.

Can this problem be solved in early school years if each parent obtains a copy of the monthly activity calendar?

Parent Participation in School Activities:

Can both parents volunteer at school?

During what activities can parents volunteer? e.g. classroom, field trips, library duties

Can a parent volunteer during the other parent's parenting time?

Are parents allowed to be on the school property on other than their parenting times and are they allowed to wait in the hallways, look in windows, etc.?

Are both parents allowed to be on school property at the same time?

What happens if both parents arrive at the school and conflict erupts?

Should police be involved if a conflict erupts?

Can new partners, friends, and extended family members attend school events, such as concerts?

If the number of attendees is limited, who picks the people that can attend the event?

When both parents are attending an activity, such as a school concert, do they need to agree ahead of time about where each will sit, about who will bring and take the child home, and about the nature of contact between all parties so that the child does not have to choose one parent over the other?

Provision of the Court Order to the School:

What procedures will be put in place to ensure that the school setting has the most recent court order?

Will one parent be designated to undertake this task in a timely manner?

Should the school be provided only with the portion of the court order that pertains to that setting rather than the whole order, given the personal and private nature of some of the information it contains? If so, how will this be achieved?

Exchanges/Transfers Outside of the School Setting

While many families opt to have the majority of exchanges and transfers of the children between the parents take place in an educational setting, others schedule transfers in alternate settings. In families where school is used as the primary transfer point, non school transfers are needed during holiday periods. In families where children are not in school or where schools have banned transfers in that setting, given the animosity and untoward behavior from parents, alternate transfer locations are needed.

General Principles:

When younger children are involved, there is generally more need for contact between parents during transfers. At all times, the child's physical safety is critical. However, this must be balanced with the potentially emotionally devastating impact that snide remarks, verbal arguments, or physical interchanges can have on children who are transferring from one parent's care to that of the other parent.

General Considerations:

The child's age is a primary consideration in establishing immediate and later plans for the management of transfers of children between parents: infants may need to be transferred from one parent's arms to those of the other parent but as children get older, they may be able to cross a threshold, walk up steps, or walk up a front pathway on their own.

How old is the child?

Is there any need for direct contact between parents except for the very young child?

If a child is a toddler or preschooler, can he or she walk alone with parents passing the child's hand from one to the other parent at the door?

If the child is of school age, can he or she walk up the sidewalk alone while the parent remains in a vehicle on the curb?

Is drop off by the parent returning the child to the other parent preferable to pick-up by the receiving parent, given that it may very well eliminate undue waiting periods at the curb while a child readies to depart?

What parameters are necessary regarding the acceptable degree of each parent's physical entry into the other parents home? For example, parents may define the limit as needing to stay in a vehicle or stand on the curb, sidewalk, bottom step, or top step, or perhaps they might be permitted one step inside the home if the weather is cold?

Does the parent who is dropping off the child need to call the other parent on a mobile phone so the receiving parent can be waiting at the door to receive the child?

Who can accompany a parent when he or she is dropping off or picking up a child?

- If another person plans on accompanying a parent during the transfer, can this person be a new partner of one of the parents, given the inflammatory effect this may have on the receiving parent and its concomitant potential to significantly increase the stress experienced by the child?
- When a child must walk to a door alone, does the receiving parent need to signal the other waiting on the curb or in a vehicle that the child has entered the home and is safe before the other parent departs?

Transfers in Neutral Locations:

- If consideration cannot be given to transfers of children at the doors to the parent's homes, what neutral location might provide for the physical safety of the child while preventing direct contact between parents? For example, transfer of the child at school, daycare, in a mall, or in a coffee shop with two doors might provide the required security for the child.
- Can an older child or adolescent safely take public transit between his or her two homes as a way to eliminate direct and upsetting contact between parents?

Transfers Handled by a Third Party:

- Is a third party required to physically transfer or supervise the exchange of the child? Who is acceptable to both parents while also being known to the child?
- Can this person maintain a sufficiently neutral stance so as to limit, rather than increase, the child's confusion and stress?

Setting the Time of Transfer:

- Given the child's natural rhythms and activity schedule, is a morning, afternoon, or evening transfer likely to most ease the transition for the child?
- Does the returning parent need to ensure the child has a meal or snack just prior to the transfer so that the child is less irritable during the transfer?
- Is the transfer set at a time that permits the child to relax and settle into routines before he or she must undertake such basic tasks as homework or getting reading for bed?
- If the child returns to the other parent in an evening prior to a school day, which parent has responsibility for ensuring the child's homework is completed?
- Can parents agree to return the child in a rested and not over-stimulated state to the other parent?

Parental Behavior and Communication During Exchanges:

- Generally in high-conflict situations, parents should not discuss any "business" over the child's head during transfers. Such discussion should be structured as outlined in the portion of their parenting plan that specifies how issues are to be discussed and resolved.
- Can parents communicate at all?
- Must comments be limited to notifying the receiving parent of issues such as illness, special school days and other activities?
- What words should be used to say good-bye and greet the child so that the child does not feel pressured or constrained? For example, if a child is so attuned to

- the animosity and conflict that he or she will not hug or kiss a parent in the presence of the other parent, a different greeting may be necessary
- Are parents able to tell the child to “Have a good time” when they are leaving so that the child has permission to enjoy time with the other parent?
- Do both parents need to institute rituals that cue the child and ease his or her transition between homes, such as having a snack, reading a special story, packing a special stuffed animal, or exchanging a special hug prior to transferring the child?
- Can parents say good-bye and leave promptly so that the child is less likely to become agitated?
- Can parents be courteous, cordial, and polite during the exchange to limit the child’s anxiety?

Delayed Returns:

- What is the scheduled return time?
- What is an acceptable reason for the delay, such as a car accident, flight delay?
- What procedures are to be used if a parent is delayed in taking the child to an exchange or picking a child up? What phone number should be called?
- What are the procedures if a parent arrives to pick up a child, and the child is not ready or even at home?

Extracurricular Activities, Including Fundraising Activities

The need to be enrolled in extracurricular activities varies considerably from child to child. At all times, this need for organized and structured activities must be balanced by the need for unstructured interaction with peers and family members and for completely unstructured individual time. The latter is important as it helps children to learn to amuse themselves, a critical life skill. A child's personality, temperament, abilities, talents, and wishes must all be taken into account when planning organized extracurricular activities as must the cost, the time spent traveling to and from the activities, and the demands of other family members. At all times, parents must remember that children learn much about life, values, and other basic skills through everyday and routine contact and interaction with them, siblings and friends, and extended family. Through interaction during meals, chores, homework, and other daily activities, parents model basic living skills, attitudes, problem-solving strategies, and social skills.

General Principles:

Activities must be matched to the age, interests, personality, and temperament of each child and it is important to avoid over programming children. Generally, younger children are likely to benefit more from home-based activities such as eating with family members, opportunities for free play, and reading with parents than from traveling to engage in structured activities, especially during the dinner and evening hours. Older children may benefit more from participation in organized activities although it is important to allow for family time and relaxation on a daily basis. It may be useful to maintain already established extracurricular activities in the immediate post-separation period, excepting when precluded by very marked changes in financial and other circumstances. At all times, parents must keep the possibility in mind that children may change activities as they mature. Older children generally have more input and say in the choice of extracurricular activities, much as is necessary when parents still live together.

Choosing Extracurricular Activities:

What are parental values about the importance of specific extracurricular activities, such as participation in sports or more arts-related activities?

How old is the child?

What are the child's personality or temperamental characteristics and how do these impact on activity choice? For example, a child with a difficult temperament may not do well with needing to adapt to new activities that necessitate new instructors and group members on a frequent basis; the child may do much better with an ongoing activity led by the same instructor? Another child might not do well in team sports, but do very well in an individual sport.

What are the child's wishes?

At what time of day does the activity occur?

Is the desired activity/lesson available during a part of the day so that it does not interfere with meals, family time, and other daily routines such as homework and a regular bedtime?

Will the activity or activities create such a busy schedule that the child and parents become overly stressed?

- What activities do siblings participate in and what stresses do these generate for family members? For example, younger children may be detrimentally impacted by the extensive travel time required to take siblings to activities, and from the need to sit-and-wait in various venues while siblings participate in activities.
- What is the frequency and competition level of the activity, i.e., community league v. competitive league?
- What is the cost of the activity, in terms of fees and equipment, and what budgetary limitations exist?
- What transportation commitments are required from both parents to support the child's participation or will one parent be responsible for all of the transportation?
- Is carpooling permitted and are both parents available to reliably participate?
- Are additional financial and often unpredictable time commitments necessary to support such activities as tournament competition or participation in various shows and artistic productions?
- What is the child's previous history and enjoyment of a specific activity?
- Does the child still enjoy participating in the activity and find it both fun and interesting or does he or she participate to please a parent or reduce conflict between parents?
- Is participation worth it for the child, especially if tension increases with the possibility that parents may argue about the child's participation or have nasty exchanges if they encounter each other?

When parents cannot agree on extracurricular activities:

- Do parents each need to pick an activity for the child, taking the child to it only during their parenting time, while still considering the impact that missing half the lessons, games, or practices might have on the child's feelings or developing skills?
- Can each parent pick one activity and yet make arrangements to ensure the child regularly attends both this choice and that of the other parent?
- Can parents resolve impasses and disagreements by agreeing to pick the extracurricular activity for the child on alternating years?
- Are parental disagreements such that they preclude the child's participation in any activity?
- Do parents need to seek an arbitrator to decide the child's activities?
- Parents must consider the impact on the child that arises from their decisions, such as:
- missing a portion of the extracurricular activity:
 - poorer skills due to missed practices or lessons, e.g. in music, hockey, dance
 - socialization with peers or team undermined
 - decreased capacity to bond with team or cast members
 - increased vulnerability for bullying
 - absence from special occasions such as display nights or performances

Involvement of Parents as observers/spectators:

In order to avoid situations where children are subject to, embarrassed about, or worry about parental encounters during extracurricular activities, parents must consider the following questions:

- Who takes the child to the activity, including both regular and special events?
- Can parents wait for the child at the venue?
- Can both parents attend various tournaments and performances and how will this be managed?
- What other persons can parents bring with them to various lessons, practices, tournaments, and performances?
- When can these other persons accompany parents?
- Can parents attend an activity as an observer when the child is in the care of the other parent?

Involvement of Parents as Volunteers and Coaches:

- Can either parent assume a role, such as coach, manager, volunteer coordinator, equipment or uniform manager, stage producer, or costume manager, in the child's extracurricular activity, while knowing that he or she will need to attend the activity during the other parent's designated parenting time?
- If parents agree that a parent can assume such a role, does this impact arrangements regarding who takes the child to the activity and who can attend as an observer?
- What arrangements are necessary to avoid a detrimental impact on the child if parents encounter each other while one is volunteering or assuming other roles in the child's activity?
- Which parent will accompany the child and/or the team on out-of-town road trips?

Involvement of Parents in Fundraising Efforts:

- If fundraising is required for the child's participation in an extracurricular activity, who will do it?
- Can one parent do fundraising activities in lieu of monetary contributions toward the costs?
- If a parent is not completely in favor of an extracurricular activity but is still required to contribute monetarily, must he or she still participate in fundraising efforts?
- If there is a no-show penalty or if a parent does not appear for a fundraising job or function, what are the consequences for that parent, i.e., forfeit of a portion of the deposit?

Costs:

- Who pays for the registration costs of the extracurricular activities?
- If parents do not share the costs, is each responsible for the costs of the activity he or she selects?
- Who pays for the required equipment?
- Who pays for replacement costs of required equipment if it is outgrown, broken, or lost?

Extracurricular Activities

Are parents willing to reduce some of the cost of required equipment by purchasing second-hand equipment?

Regardless of who ultimately pays for the equipment, who is responsible for selecting and purchasing the equipment?

Who pays for lessons?

Who pays for the costs of necessary transportation, lodging, and meals on required out-of-town travel that is part of the extracurricular activity?

Who is responsible for paying for optional team materials, such as a team jacket, fleece shirts, or warm-up suit?

Who pays for social activities associated with the extracurricular involvement, such as pizza night fees or gifts for coaches or teachers?

Is there a yearly limit to allowable costs for activities, i.e., a budget?

Is there a way to manage escalating costs over the course of the child's participation in an activity so that each parent can anticipate and plan for the increased financial demands? For example, costs for hockey and musical theater often rise dramatically with the child's progress.

Notification regarding cancellations or changes in scheduled extracurricular activities:

Can arrangements be made so that the organization notifies both parents of cancellations or changes in planned activities or is the organizational policy such that only one parent can be notified? Who will this be and how will that parent notify the other and in what time span?

In situations where both parents might be planning on attending an activity and the child cannot attend due, for example, to ill health, how and when will the parent notify the other?

How will parents resolve a conflict in scheduling between two activities?

This might include such conflicts as:

hockey pizza night v. choir practice

overlap between two sport activities as the seasons change – play offs in one with tryouts for the next

Notification regarding medical emergencies that occur during extracurricular activities:

What degree of injury necessitates immediate notification of the other parent?

Is it broken bones, stitches, or an ambulance trip to the hospital?

What primary contact number should be used to notify the other parent?

If the parent is busy or unavailable, should someone else be notified in the parent's stead who will then attempt to contact the parent about the child's injury so that the immediate parent can direct attention to obtaining appropriate medical services for the child?

Peer Contacts

Children often benefit from contacts with their peers outside of school or during extracurricular activities. Again, parents need to take the child's personality, temperament, abilities, interests, and wishes into account when arranging such activities. Additionally, parents need to ensure the safety of these contacts in both their own homes as well as in those of the child's peers. While the immediate parent will make the daily decisions about contacts with peers during his or her own parenting time, conflicts may emerge when children receive invitations to social events and activities that occur during the child's time with the other parent. It is always critical to insure adult supervision during such activities, much as parents would do if they still resided in the same home.

Invitations to social events such as birthday parties, sleepovers, and excursions:

Regardless of the child's location, when an invitation arrives, who makes the decision regarding attendance? For example, it is often preferable for the parent in whose care the child will be on the day of the event, to make the decision about attendance.

How will the notification about the invitation or the event be communicated to the other parent who will be making the decision?

Whose responsibility is it to RSVP?

Who will buy the gift if the event is a friend's birthday party?

If the invitation is for the child to accompany a friend on a weekend or holiday excursion away from his or her home community, who gives consent? Should the principle noted earlier be employed so that the parent expected to be in the immediate parenting role at the time of the excursion is the parent who gives consent?

Who is responsible for buying special clothes and buying/renting equipment for the excursion?

Who is responsible for providing spending money or phone cards for the child's use during the excursion?

On such an excursion, is the child permitted to leave school early or return late to accommodate the host child's family schedule?

If the excursion is to a location out of the country, who will provide the passport and necessary documentation?

Arrangements for the Child's own birthday party:

If a party with peers is planned, will the child have only one of these each year or will parents each hold a separate party?

Which parent will host the party?

Will parents alternate hosting on a yearly basis?

Will the party be held on the hosting parent's parenting time? (likely a good idea)

For themed parties, how is the theme chosen, is cost an issue, and how will costs be divided? For example, some parents plan, host, and pay for the party during the year in which it is his/her responsibility. Others jointly decide and share costs.

What happens if a parent chooses a theme that is objectionable to the other parent?

Does the child have a say in choosing the theme?

How do parents balance the child's wishes and the number of peers invited, against costs and the parent's available energy?

Does the child even want a birthday party with peers?

Does the child prefer to celebrate with one or two friends or with a large group of peers?

Where will the party be held – home or other venue?

Who sends the invitations and receives the RSVPs?

If loot bags are planned, who buys the treats and assembles the bags?

Can both parents attend the peer party, particularly if it is not held at the home of one of the parents? How would the child feel about both parents coming to the party?

How would the child feel if both parents attend the party and yet cannot be respectful of each other?

If both parents do attend the party and conflict arises, who is designated to depart so the child can relax and not be subject to emotional stress and embarrassment?

Can other adults attend the party, such as the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and new partners? Again, consider how the child would react and feel and what is the plan if tension and conflict arise.

Particular caution is warranted when parents plan to jointly attend a birthday party held in the home of either parent.

In regards to gifts received at the party, where do they remain? Are they considered to be the child's property and the child can take them between homes as he or she wishes or do they stay in the host parent's home, i.e., child's property or home-specific property?

Safety issues:

Will parents take steps to ensure that the child is supervised properly when visiting with peers, such as by talking to the friend's parent to determine the specific arrangements?

What special considerations are necessary to ensure the child's safety:

if the child is dropped at a movie with friends

if the child is dropped at a shopping mall with friends

if the child plans to ride public transit alone or with friends

At what age can the child be left home alone?

At what age and under what circumstances is the child permitted to assume the responsibility of baby sitting?

Family Celebrations

Many children are part of much larger extended families who celebrate various special occasions together as a larger family group. Consideration must be given to if and how the child's attendance at such celebrations is to be accommodated. In most situations, the event can be celebrated on a different day but in some, such as a wedding or memorial service for a very close relative or person with whom the child has or had a significant relationship, the parent has little say in the scheduling and accommodations may be necessary.

Family Celebration of Child's Birthday:

- For the child's personal birthday gift(s) from parents, will a joint gift be chosen or will each parent simply purchase separate gifts?
- If a joint gift is planned, how will this be purchased and who will pay for it?
- Will arrangements be made for the child to see each parent on his or her birthday or is the stress for the child so increased that such a plan is not reasonable?
- If the child is to see each parent on his or her birthday, what is the best structure for the contact after considering travel time, transfer arrangements, length of visit, and the next day's activities, such as attending school?
- If the child goes to spend time with the other parent on his or her birthday, must that other parent pay back the time to the parent in whose care the child usually is on that day?
- Is it a better plan for each parent to celebrate the child's birthday when the child is in his or her care?

Family Celebrations, such as Parent's Birthday, Mother's Day, and Father's Day:

- Will arrangements be made for the child to spend time with each parent on the parent's celebration day or are the changes in the usual parenting patterns such that the added stress makes such alterations unworkable?
- In making these arrangements, consider whether the child is already in that parent's care, how long a visit might be, the travel required, and how the transfer is structured.
- Also consider the disruptions to the child's schedules and the potential for nasty interaction and conflict erupting versus the benefits that might accrue to the child from sharing this time, especially if the arrangements and transfers can be made in a neutral or positive manner.
- If parents decide to make arrangements for contact with a parent that does not occur in his or her usual parenting time, does that parent need to pay back the time to the other parent?
- Is there any detriment that accrues to the child from celebrating these occasions during regular parenting times with each parent?

Family Celebrations of Family Birthdays, Anniversaries, Reunions, Funerals, Religious Ceremonies:

Can these celebrations be scheduled in each parent's already established parenting times so that added conflict between parents and the consequent stress for the child is reduced?

When the dates for special celebrations with members of the extended family are out of a parent's control and the parent does not have the child in his or her care on the set date, can special arrangements for the child's attendance be possible?

What special celebrations might fall into this category?

How much notice must be given to the other parent about such events?

Does the parent pay back the time, perhaps by trading a weekend?

What is the time compensation required, especially when several days are used in traveling to an out-of-town or distant location?

Who buys or prepares the child's special clothing for the event?

Who buys the gifts required for the celebration?

Who pays for travel costs?

Is a passport and travel letter required? Who arranges and pays for such documents?

Who retains the travel documentation after travel is completed?

In large family gatherings, how will the parent supervised the child and ensure his or her safety?

What happens if the other parent has high distrust in the extended family members' capacity to act in appropriate and safe ways around the child?

Who makes the final decision about the child's attendance?

What happens if the child does not want to go to the event?

What happens if the child already has significant activities scheduled for the day and his or her absence might have a negative impact, e.g. high school diploma exams?

If the child or a parent is being baptized or is participating in a religious ceremony, will the other parent be invited or can special arrangements be made to allow the child to attend the ceremony?

Holiday Arrangements

During the course of a child's year, various holiday periods occur when the child has scheduled breaks from the usual routine of attending school and extracurricular activities. These are normally known well in advance and permit opportunities for parents to schedule various holiday trips, camps, or other activities. To accommodate such activities, the usual parenting schedule is often varied. Parents need to thoughtfully consider how the regular parenting schedules will be varied during these periods, if at all.

Common holiday periods:

Breaks in regular school schedules may include:

Teachers' convention/Family Day holiday (often 5-days long in Alberta in February)

Spring/Easter/Passover Break (often at least 10 days long and may or may not include a separate Easter long weekend)

Summer holiday (6-8 weeks depending on if the school has a traditional or modified program)

Winter/Christmas break (often 14-16 days long)

Extended Religious holidays in which children do not attend school

When are the holiday periods for the children in this family?

Variations in the Usual Parenting Schedule:

Are parents agreeable to varying the regular parenting period to accommodate holiday periods?

Have parents established a regular transfer day, such as Thursday, that already allows for easier accommodations for long weekends throughout the year and may very well ease the transitions into longer holiday periods?

If parents plan to change the regular parenting schedule during these holiday blocks of time, will parameters be set that are applied on a yearly basis?

Alternatively, do parents prefer to negotiate the dates for larger holiday blocks of time on a yearly or holiday-by-holiday basis, keeping in mind that this may very well generate more disagreement and conflict.

Given that parents' work and holiday schedules often differ from the child's scheduled school

holidays, it is often wise to plan holiday schedules on a yearly basis rather than on a holiday-by-holiday basis. The latter may result in confusion and sometimes crisis situations.

How do parents plan to vary the regular parenting schedule, perhaps alternating summer holiday periods on a 4-week, 2-week, or 1-week schedule? Some establish the holiday parenting schedules depending upon whether the year is even or odd. For example, a child spends time with the father at the beginning of winter break for all evenly numbered years and with the mother on all odd years.

Are parents able to anticipate changes in the activities planned during holiday periods, attuning to the child's age and thereby also meeting the child's needs rather than only those of the parents?

Are parents sensitive to the child's age and needs in determining the length of holiday blocks, given that a young child may have difficulty tolerating long separations from a parent on whom he or she is highly dependent. A longer-term plan that gradually increases holiday length is sometime a prudent accommodation.

Short-notice changes and accommodations:

What procedures, if any, may be used and under what circumstances to accommodate the situation where a parent is not informed about his or her allotted holiday periods until shortly before the actual holiday period with the child? Many parents have little control over their own employment schedules and cannot make plans far in advance.

What, if any, is the minimal notice required for changing schedules to accommodate a parent's planned vacation periods?

If last minute changes occur, as in the situation where a parent cannot take the child during their designated holiday period, is the other parent expected to change their own plans to accommodate caring for the child? Parents need not feel pressured or guilty about being unable to make these accommodations.

How will the children be informed of their cancelled holiday and the alternate arrangements?

If a parent cannot take time off work to accommodate all of the children's holiday periods, what happens in regards to care of the child?

Can the child be in the care of a day-care, baby sitter, new spouse, or member of the extended family during holiday periods? For example, can the child attend day or over night camps or must the parent be personally parenting for the entire holiday?

Reciprocity and payback:

If holiday has impinged on the other parent's time or if a parent makes accommodations to facilitate the other's plan, is reciprocity required? In other words, will time exchanged be made up or paid back?

If payback of time is planned, should this be expected immediately or in the future?

Will this payback time have any effect on the regular parenting schedule?

Child's location when away from home:

Is it important for parents to know where their child is during holidays when not staying at home?

If so, how will this information be provided or exchanged with the other parents, e.g., calls, printed itinerary, voice mail, e-mail?

If a child is leaving the province, will any type of letter or documentation be necessary?

International Travel:

Who will take responsibility for preparing the specific documentation necessary for international travel?

The travel document may include such items as:

Passport

Non traveling parent's permission letter – federal requirement

Non traveling parent must have this notarized. Who pays the notary fee?

Flight and accommodation itinerary – including specific dates and flights

Phone number at accommodations

Non traveling parent's contact information

Specific written permission to seek emergency medical care

Vaccination records or other necessary medical records

Will a passport be necessary for travel?

Who will apply for the passport?

Who will sign as the guarantor for the child's passport?

Who will pay for the passport?

Who will hold the passport?

Who will arrange for necessary travel vaccinations?

Who will pay for vaccinations?

Who will take the child to the travel clinic?

Who will hold the documentation pertaining to the vaccinations?

Under what exceptional circumstances would a parent not be listed as the emergency contact?

Communication with the non traveling parent:

Will the children be expected to call on contact the non traveling parent?

Who pays for the telephone calls?

Will phone cards be provided?

Which way does the call go, such as child to parent or parent to child?

What time are the calls to be made, given that different time zones may result in calls at odd hours?

Do adolescents need to call the non traveling parent?

Special clothing and equipment:

Will any special or new clothing or equipment be required for the holiday?

Why buys it?

Who packs it?

If new clothes or equipment are purchased, who retains it on return and can the other parent use it for the child on his or her own holiday with the child?

Is the situation such that lists of these materials must be retained?

The same considerations would apply to attendance at camps and other structured holiday activities? Although the actual registration costs may be covered under Section 7 expenses, this needs to be clarified.

Costs:

Although in most families parents pay for the child's holiday expenses, such as plane tickets, are there any exceptional circumstances in which this general rule would not apply?

Alternate child care:

In the unusual situation where one parent may take a child on a holiday while leaving the other siblings behind, perhaps because of different school holiday periods, who will care for the siblings staying behind?

If the traveling parent should have those children in his or her care, can they designate a different care provider or does the non traveling parent automatically provide care during the absence? Note that without a formal agreement between parents, schools would likely only be able to release to the actual guardian who is likely the non traveling parent.

Missed school days:

If holidays are planned during designated school days, is it permissible for children to miss any days of school?

Is there a maximum number permissible and should it be related to the child's actual academic performance and their age and grade? For example, a high school student taking mathematics will possibly be handicapped by missing any of his or her instruction.

Child's wishes:

Will the child's wishes be considered in regards to going on the holiday? For example, a teenager may not want to go on a family holiday. In blended families, this issue may create additional complexities.

Travel insurance:

Who will ensure that travel insurance is obtained for the holiday to guarantee that no additional high costs are incurred for emergency care out of the province? Should extra medical costs be incurred, how will they be paid?

Health and Mental Health Care

During the course of their childhoods, children may consult various health care providers such as family physicians and medical specialists, dentists, orthodontists, naturopaths, optometrists, ophthalmologists, chiropractors, counselors, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, audiologists, etc.

Selecting a Health Care Provider;

- Under what circumstances would the children not retain the same health care providers they saw prior to the family break-up, given the strong sense of continuity that children may derive from such relationships?
- If a child requires a new care provider, who selects the provider?
- Under what name will the child be registered with the provider?
- How will a decision about a consultation be made if parents do not agree on the need for the consult or treatment itself?
- How will a decision about a consultation be made if parents do not agree regarding on the actual practitioner?
- When is a second opinion needed and who would pay for this?

Appointments and Routine Provision of Care:

- Will one parent be responsible for setting appointments and taking the child to the consultations or will parents divide these responsibilities by type of practitioner, parenting time block, employment schedules, the insurance plan subscriber, etc.?
- Alternatively, will they alternate taking the child to appointments while recognizing that this will require more communication between them?
- Will both parents have direct access to the child's records?
- Who retains written documentations, such as the child's immunization record?
- How will information be shared about the findings of the consultations or the treatment progress?
- If a medical practitioner recommends a medication regime for a child, are there any exceptional circumstances where parents do not need to follow the treatment plan? The same would apply for recommendations from other practitioners.

Emergency Care:

- In the event that emergency care is required, parents should agree that the on-duty parent accurately indicates the contact information for both parents
- Should the parent request that the emergency setting immediately contact the other parent or is that parent willing to make this prompt contact?
- Once notified, should the other parent attend the emergency setting or do circumstances exist that would preclude their attendance, such as a restraining order?
- Will parents be able to maintain civility to ensure that the child is not further traumatized by the experience?
- If one parent does not attend, how will he or she be updated about the child's status?

Costs for Care:

Who pays the basic medical fees?

Who pays extra costs, such as:

extended benefit plans

uncovered portions of costs

medications, supplements, medical appliances, orthotics, special diet, corrective lenses

lost orthodontic appliances and corrective lenses

When one parent wishes the child to undergo a specific treatment that is not covered under standard health care, will this be a legitimate extraordinary expense (Section 7 in Canada). In other words, will both parents be contributing to cost?

Who bears the cost of any nonessential medical interventions and materials, such as cosmetic orthodontics or contact lenses?

Transfers of Medical and Related Materials:

When children require ongoing medications, does this travel between homes or will each have their own supply?

What happens if needed materials are forgotten in one home and must be retrieved after the child has transferred to other parent's care?

General Issues regarding Mental Health:

Given that many people are sensitive and cautious about seeking input for mental health concerns and that some people see the need for mental health input for their children as reflecting negatively on their parenting, specific considerations arise in regards to this specific type of intervention.

Parents need to ensure that they are very clear about the limits to confidentiality in this situation:

Can information be shared with both parents and can this include information about the other parent?

Who else might access the information and who would give consent for that access?

Additionally, the role of the professional in life of the child and family must be clearly specified. For example, a counselor cannot assume an assessment role and **cannot make recommendations about custody/access**. Similarly, an assessor cannot also undertake simultaneous counselling with family members. Thus parents must clarify such distinctions (therapist v. assessor) from the very beginning of their contact with a mental health professional.

Values regarding health and mental health care

Given that parents may have divergent values regarding the importance of various aspects of the child's needs for health and other related services, parents need to specify a common statement of values regarding issues, such as:

Conventional v. alternative interventions

Non essential medical interventions , such as cosmetic procedures and body piercing

How religious and cultural practices will be applied in medical and related decision making, such as birth control, alcohol use, etc.

What degree and/or chronicity of a problem must exist before seeking consultation?

Religious and Cultural Practices

Given that religious and cultural practices are based on deeply held beliefs, they have the potential to create marked divisions between parents that in turn impact significantly on children. Parents will need to consider how they will manage their differences while respecting the other parent's beliefs and diversity. Careful management of these issues can contribute much to helping children become tolerant and respectful people.

Religious Affiliations:

If parents have the same religious affiliation, are they able to attend the same place of worship?

In what exceptional circumstances would parents of different affiliations not be free to share their faith and religious practices with the children?

How will parents come to a consensus about the child's participation in more formal rituals and rites of a religion, considering that some of these involve regular preparation for lengthy periods?

Who will transport the child to these lessons, participate with the child, pay the accompanying cost, and put on the celebratory reception?

Are the child's wishes to be taken into account regarding participation in religious activities?

Are parents agreeable to a child's placement in a religiously based school program?

Cultural Practices:

In what exceptional circumstances would parents of different cultures not be free to share their cultural practices with the children?

How will parents come to a consensus about the child's participation in more cultural practices, considering that some of these involve regular preparation? For example, some children may need to attend language or cultural dance classes on a weekly basis.

Who will transport the child to these lessons, participate with the child, pay the accompanying costs for lessons and costumes?

Are the child's wishes to be taken into account regarding participation in cultural activities?

Are parents agreeable to a child's placement in a culturally based school program?

Introduction of New Partners

A particularly sensitive issue that has implications for a child's adaptation to family separation is the introduction of new partners. Prior discussion of how such introductions are to be handled may very well ease the situation for all family members. Regardless of the presence of new partners, parents must always stay aware that they are and will always remain the child's parents. New partners do not assume primary parenting or decision-making responsibilities even though they may provide some of the day-to-day parenting.

New partners

- Do parents want to be informed when the other is planning to introduce the children to a new potential partner?
- How will the introduction be handled?
- By what name will the children call the new partner?
- Will the other parent meet the new partner before the children do and what is the purpose of the meeting?
- How will the children be supported to develop a healthy but non parental relationship with this new partner?
- Under what exceptional circumstances would the other parent not support the child's relationship with the new partner?
- What role, in terms of discipline and parenting, will the new partner fill, keeping in mind that the new partner should remain relatively passive and not usurp the parenting role from either parent?
- What are appropriate or acceptable behaviors between the parent and new partner when the children are present?
- When is it appropriate for a new partner to begin staying overnight when the children are present in the home?

Children of the new partner

- When and how will children be introduced to children of the new partner?
- If these children are older, will they be expected to provide any child care to the children?

Third Party Care Providers

As parents can seldom provide all of the daily care for their children, many engage third party care providers. These child care providers may include:

- Day care
- Nannies
- Day homes
- Relatives
- Neighbors
- Friends
- New partners
- Significant others

Initial Choices:

Given that these providers are entrusted with the children's care and safety, how will parents identify and chose these people?

Should the other parent be given first right of care, when a parent cannot provide this ongoing care personally? For example, this might include before and after school care, overnights to accommodate business or out-of-town travel?

Is there a minimum time frame that should apply?

Professional child care providers:

Who will interview potential professional child care providers, such as day home operators and nannies?

Who will contract with the provider?

Who will supervise the provider?

Who will pay for them?

Who will claim the child care expenses on a tax return?

If there is one nanny, will the nanny move between homes?

If one parent hires an alternate provider to be used during his or her parenting times, does the other have access to information about that provider and can they speak with that provider? For example, this might include reviewing a copy of a nanny's resume.

How will parents ensure that neither will demand a one-sided allegiance of the care provider, thereby avoiding involving the provider in the conflict and increasing any polarization ?

Who will communicate changes in schedules and absences of the child to the child care provider?

This can be particularly problematic on days when the child is transferring between homes.

Given that third-party care providers often are placed in the situations as educators, readers may want to reference the education section as well.

Nonprofessional child care providers (e.g. family members, friends):

Is there any particular person in whose care the children should not be entrusted due to safety concerns? For example, these may include people with alcohol/substance use, medical problems, etc.

How will parents handle situations where one does not agree with the other's choice of an informal child care provider?

If informal care providers use harsh discipline procedures, such as swearing, name calling, spanking, and slapping, would they be considered inappropriate as care givers?

What types of disciplinary procedures are acceptable for use by a third party?

At what age can older siblings/step-siblings, relatives, or baby sitters care for younger siblings and for how long?

Children Left Alone

Is there a minimum age at which children can be left by themselves and don't require a third party care provider?

For what maximum period can a child be left on their own?