

PLANNING FOR YOUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE:

**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CUSTODY AND
PLACEMENT**

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INTRODUCTION

As parents you are faced with a very difficult task. Not only are you having to handle your own feelings about your separation or divorce, but you are faced with having to continue to be a “good parent” for your children. Even under the BEST of circumstances, parenting is a demanding and challenging job! Coupled with the emotional stress and strain of a divorce, you may at times feel overwhelmed by the challenge. But you are not alone, and there are many things you can do to help you and your children cope.

One of the hardest things you will have to do is to create a working relationship with the other parent. You both are faced with the emotional task of separating from each other, while having to remain in contact about your kids. Many parents find this task nearly impossible. Nevertheless, one of the most significant predictors of your children’s emotional adjustment will be your ability to cooperate with the other parent, and make mutual decisions about your children’s welfare.

The guidelines which follow will assist you in creating a working blueprint for raising your children in two separate households. Keep in mind however that there is no one plan or method that works for all families. You may never be entirely satisfied with the placement schedule—you may feel lonely on the days your children are not with you, you may worry about them when they are at the other parent’s house, and your children may miss you when they are apart from you. But with determination and a will to succeed, you both can create a plan which will consider not only your needs but theirs as well.

Development of a civil, respectful working relationship with your ex-partner may be one of the most meaningful gifts you can give your children. In fact, it can be concluded from many research studies that

the single most important predictor of your children's emotional adjustment is the extent to which you both can effectively communicate regarding their needs. Later on we will discuss ways you can build this type of relationship, even if you now believe that you could never cooperate about anything!

GENERAL GUIDELINES

While parents and attorneys are often preoccupied with placement schedules, "sole" vs. "joint" custody, and child support issues, research tells us that there are other issues affecting children which may be far more important regarding their emotional health. Your children may be much more likely to develop significant emotional problems if any of the following things are true, no matter what the placement schedule is:

1. Parents are locked in conflict over a long period of time and are unable to protect the children from being "caught in the middle."
2. One parent attempts to negatively "brainwash" the children against the other parent, hoping to turn the children against that parent.
3. Parents engage in poor quality parenting (i.e., being overly authoritarian, inconsistent, or permissive, not showing affection or love to the child, not assisting the child in developing skills, not attending to the medical, social or emotional needs of the child, etc).
4. One parent decides to drop out from being a parent, moves far away, or is no longer emotionally or physically available to the children.
5. A parent suffers significant psychological or emotional problems, such as depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol or drug abuse, or personality problems, and refuses to seek treatment for these problems.

6. Your children's placement schedule requires that a child is removed for inappropriately long periods of time from one parent, resulting in frequent disruption of attachment to that parent.
7. One or both parents suffers significant financial distress, or lives in chronic poverty and economic distress, with no access to community support or the support of extended family.

Note that all of these factors have the effect of compromising a child's relationship with both parents. Children respond well when they know that they can be assured of regular, predictable access to both parents, and that their relationship with each parent is supported by the other parent. This does not mean that you need to agree with everything the other parent does (in fact, parents often disagree on parenting strategies while they are happily married!), but it simply means that in general you support the other parent as being just as important as you are in your children's lives.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CONTINUITY

Ideally, you should strive to make your children's everyday experience with you as similar as possible to the way things were before the separation. With all the change and uncertainty children are experiencing, it is important to keep in place as much "sameness" as possible. This is easier said than done! However, children thrive and feel secure when they have predictable routines. Here is an example:

Susan's mother typically got her up in the mornings and helped her get dressed and off to school. Her Dad worked the late shift and usually slept in. He had his "quality time" with his daughter usually on weekends when he was off. An initial placement schedule might reflect this pattern, with Susan being with her mother most school days and with her Dad on his days off. If Susan's parents, however, shared in the everyday tasks, it would be advisable to continue this pattern, with both parents sharing weekday and weekend tasks. hus,

things look pretty much the same to Susan, and this could make the stress of the separation a little easier to bear.

Another example: Caleb's father worked the night shift, and was usually Available to pick the child up after school and have him until Mom came home from work. After the separation, Caleb's father continued this practice, and would take the child to his mother's house once she was home from work. This saved both parents a considerable amount of money that ordinarily would have been spent on sitters or daycare.

Changes in your child's day-to-day routines should be kept to a minimum. After- school activities such as sports, Scouts, music, and religious activities should continue, and each parent would normally be expected to support the children in these activities.

Contacts with relatives should also follow the same frequency following a separation, since children usually have strong and significant bonds with relatives on both sides. The ongoing support of family and friends can provide a supportive buffer for your children and should be encouraged. Try to avoid the common mistake of wanting friends or relatives to "side" with you against the other parent.

If you provided the ongoing day-to-day care of your young child prior to the separation, you should continue this pattern. The parent who generally remained at home feeding, bathing, nursing, and in general taking care of the day-to-day needs of the child should continue in this role if possible. Of course your child should maintain quality contact with the previously "less-involved" parent. In many cases, mothers provide the ongoing care of young children while fathers "help out" or engage in more playful or entertaining-type activities with the young child. You may find that the children's father now wishes to have more of an active role in the day-to-day care of the child, and this should be encouraged.

Finally, there is little research available to date indicating that mothers are more adept or skilled at child-rearing. There is also no research indicating that the mother-child bond is more "primary" than the father-child bond or that children need fathers any less than mothers. Children are able to make multiple attachments to multiple

caregivers, provided that those caregivers are capable and willing, available to the child on a regular basis, and who make the child their top priority.

If one parent was minimally involved in the caretaking of the children prior to the separation, there is a risk that he/she will be more likely to “drop out” of the parenting role after the separation, especially if his/her role is not supported or encouraged by the other more involved parent. If the child has a bond with that parent (no matter how weak), this would be likely be perceived as a significant loss by the child as he/she grows older.

MOVING TO “SHARED PLACEMENT”

Shared placement (parents sharing fairly equally in child rearing responsibilities) is more likely to work if the following conditions are present:

1. Both parents shared relatively equally in the parenting prior to the separation.
2. Both parents live relatively close to each other (within 20-30 minutes) and/or in the same or adjacent school district.
3. Both parents share basically similar parenting styles and values.
4. Both parents support each other as equal partners in childrearing, and fathers are open to accepting advice and guidance from mothers in the care of young children.
5. Both parents attempt to shield their children from any conflicts or arguments they might have, and arrange high quality transition between households.
6. The children are blessed with easy-going, flexible personalities and appear to handle transitions between households with little disruption.

THE QUESTION OF “50/50” PLACEMENT SCHEDULES

Many parents seek to have “50/50” or “exactly equal” placement schedules for their children. There is little research indicating that 50/50, or 40/60, or 30/70, or any other particular numerical combination of overnights makes any substantial difference in children’s post-divorce adjustment. What matters is that both parents feel that they have meaningful and significant involvement in the upbringing of their children, and that they are not being unreasonably excluded from their children’s lives.

Some children do well with shared placement schedules. Others will not, even under ideal conditions. Many children do not have the personality and temperament to adapt to spending equal times in two households, whereas others will. Some children need the predictability and consistency of “one home,” whereas others do not seem to have this need. Children who have difficulty organizing their time, or who need structure and routine, may not do well with a two-home model. You might want to consider that most families do NOT have parents sharing their time exactly “50/50” prior to a divorce! The “50/50” concept is essentially a legal or philosophical issue which ultimately makes little difference to children. As far as your children are concerned, it is the quality of their relationship with you, not whether they have an equal number of overnights, that makes a difference in their lives!

You may hear your child request “equal time” with each of you. This is not really surprising, given that they have learned early on that sharing things equally is a way to avoid conflict and be “fair.” They may be hoping that dividing themselves “in half” will be a fair and equitable way to make both of their parents happy, especially if they perceive that one parent is not happy with the arrangement. Many children feel responsible for their parents’ divorce and figure that by “dividing themselves in half,” they can perhaps undo the damage, or at least obtain some semblance of having their family back.

It is not unusual for parents to differ in how they believe their children are doing. One parent may see the children as not adjusting well to the schedule, or to the exchanges, while the other parent may see

very few symptoms if any! It sometimes appears that the parent who is less satisfied with the custody/placement schedule may magnify symptoms in the children, whereas the parent who is happy with the status quo may minimize any symptoms he/she sees. To complicate matters ever further, it is not unusual for children to exhibit more symptoms at one parent's household than with the other parent. Children do behave differently with moms and dads (and with teachers, sitters and day care providers as well). Many parents report that children seem to behave better with dads compared to moms. To help you sort out what is really happening, it may be useful to get a professional consultation from a counselor who is skilled in understanding and interpreting your children's symptoms.

DESIGNING PLACEMENT SCHEDULES BASED ON AGE OF CHILD

General principles:

The task of designing appropriate placement schedules for children depends on many factors, including the wishes of the parents, parents' abilities and involvement prior to the separation, personality and mood of the child, amount of conflict between the parents, geographical distance between households, and parent's work schedules. Here are some general guidelines to consider as you and your partner design your children's schedule:

1. Fathers who are actively involved with the upbringing of their children are more likely to remain involved over time and provide financial support to the children. Children who grow up with two involved parents are less likely to have academic, social, and emotional problems when they are older. There is little research indicating that children can only have one primary attachment, or one "primary household." The ideal arrangement for most families is to have two active, involved parents who support each other and cooperate well in decisions affecting their children. This may take

some time to accomplish, especially if your relationship with the other parent has been marked by significant conflict.

2. Children who begin to think that one parent is denying them contact with the other are likely to resent that parent and may develop an intense longing to be with the other parent. This longing may persist for years, but children may be reluctant to express this directly to the “guilty” parent, fearing his or her disapproval.

3. Frequency of contact with the non-residential parent (in most cases, the father) may not be as important as the quality of that contact, within certain limits. Of course, if contact is minimal, quality will suffer also. Fathers should not be relegated to a “weekend dad” role, to prevent children from developing an unrealistic idea of each parents’ roles--expecting non-stop entertainment from Dad, and “rules, chores, and homework” with Mom.

4. Typically, mothers typically tend to be the “gatekeepers” in terms of fathers’ access to the children, and fathers often resent feeling that they are on the “outside,” always having to “beg” or demand additional time with the children. Many fathers may feel insecure regarding their own role in their children’s lives and therefore will then tend to rely more on using legal means to assert their rights. They may become preoccupied with counting days, making up lost time, and threatening legal action when they feel less secure in their children’s lives. A vicious circle is created when this occurs, resulting in the mother feeling threatened, becoming less cooperative and flexible, and driving the father to taking further legal action to “open the door” to the children. When the non-residential parent (again, usually fathers) feels his relationship with the child is secure and consistent, this vicious circle might begin to dissolve.

5. Changing too quickly into a caretaking pattern a child is not accustomed to may cause her to develop separation anxiety. Typically, young children are more likely to show anxious symptoms (clinging, whining, aggressiveness, dependent behavior, sleep disruption, etc) when returned to the mother, and these symptoms may not be apparent while at Dad’s house. It is better to gradually increase time with the previously less-involved parent rather than jump to a schedule the child may not easily adapt to. Keep in mind

also that children between the ages of 12-36 months typically can become anxious about separations and may resist transitions between parents' homes.

There is little research support for the idea of a child needing "one home/one primary parent." Many children do quite well in multiple caregiving situations, and develop attachments to many different parent-figures. Some children however will need the security of a primary attachment and a "primary home" in order to develop a base of security from which to develop secure attachments with others. Professional assistance may be needed to help you decide if this is the case for your family. The last thing parents want is a child who develops an "attachment disorder," resulting in the child being unable to emotionally bond with EITHER parent. Mothers should bear in mind however that active involvement by the father in the daily caregiving of the child, including overnights, ensures that the father will remain in a long-term commitment to the child, and also makes it more likely that the father will continue to contribute to the financial support of the child. Furthermore, the mother-child relationship appears to be better if the father is actively involved in the care of the child, especially for boys.

There are some situations however where overnights with a father may lead to further attachment disturbances. These include a history of physical or emotional abuse between the parents, a failure to coordinate routines between households, mental health issues present in parent and/or children, and inability of the child to handle frequent changes in caregiver patterns.

AGE GUIDELINES

Use the following suggestions as **general** guidelines in planning your placement schedule. There is no one system which will fit all families. **These guidelines ASSUME that you and your partner are able to cooperate in most matters related to the children, and ASSUME that both of you desire a relatively equal partnership in the upbringing of your children.** Also, these guidelines ASSUME you live a reasonable distance (less than 30 minutes driving time,

depending on parent's tolerance for driving). If you and the other parent have a history of high conflict and a low degree of cooperation, or if restraining orders are in effect, please refer to the section entitled "Placement Schedules for High Conflict Situations."

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BIRTH TO 6 MONTHS:

The primary goal for infants is the development of secure attachment to at least one parent figure. The infant needs ongoing predictability, security, and the maintenance of a regular routine that meets the infant's physical and emotional needs. If these conditions are not met, the infant is at risk for attachment disorders or separation anxiety, and may be unable to attach securely to either parent. Frequent, meaningful contact with both parents is a key, provided both parents can communicate well and coordinate the baby's feeding and sleeping routines.

If parents cannot cooperate well in maintaining the necessary routines for care, the infant should remain in the primary care of the mother (presuming she has provided the primary care of the child) until such cooperation can be accomplished. The father should have frequent and regular contact with the baby, and be encouraged to participate in the baby's feeding, bathing, and sleep routines. A minimum of 3-4 visits per week, lasting 1-3 hours, may work well. The father may have the baby for up to a full day (6-8 hours) once per week provided the baby is ready to accept a bottle, and the customary feeding and naptime schedules are maintained. The father should attempt to remain open to accepting advice and guidance from the mother as needed, including the mother's advice and opinions about the baby's readiness for overnights away from her.

Parents need to balance the infant's need for developing a sense of security with the goal of developing attachments to two parents. There is no need for the non-residential

parent to have a “50/50” schedule with the infant to develop an attachment. Simply having ongoing, fairly frequent contacts with the non-residential parent will enable this attachment to occur.

6 MONTHS TO 12 MONTHS:

The maintenance of a secure and predictable routine is still very important. The baby may more readily accept overnights, starting with one per week, with the non-residential parent , depending upon the baby’s temperament as well as the parents’ ability to cooperate with and support each other. Overnight time will assist bonding and development of night-time rituals between the non-residential parent and child. Feeding is given by bottle, or the child is returned to the mother at feeding time.

As the child nears one year old, and appears to be adapting well to the overnights, up to three non-consecutive overnights per week may be initiated with the non-residential parent on an experimental basis. Be alert to signs of separation anxiety (usually more apparent upon the return of the child to the residential parent), and if these appear, return to one overnight for 6-8 weeks until the child matures out of the symptoms. Forcing a young child to accept overnights before he or she is ready will likely result in serious emotional distress later on, and the resulting attachment problems may be difficult to resolve.

Again, the mother’s advice and guidance should be sought and followed regarding care of the child. Parents should remain open to consulting with a child therapist for advice regarding coordination of care, managing transitions, reducing separation anxiety, and the like.

1 TO 3 YEARS OLD:

Frequency of contact is still important—shorter, more frequent contacts are usually better than longer, less frequent ones. You should limit time to 2 days away from either parent initially, extending to 3 days as the child nears the 3 year old mark, unless separation anxiety symptoms appear. The non-residential parent may have 2-3 shorter periods during week (1-3 hours), plus a longer block on the weekend (or days off), lasting up to 24 hours.

Remember that children this age usually do not adapt well to separations and may begin to resist transitions between their two homes (see the section below entitled “managing transitions”). Separation anxiety symptoms are usually quite normal at this age, and children should eventually grow out of them. It may take professional evaluation to determine whether these anxiety symptoms are severe enough to warrant a change in the placement schedule.

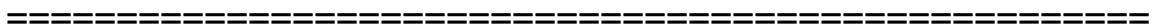
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3 TO 5 YEARS OLD:

The child may spend up to 3 nights away from the residential parent per two- week period, **provided the child appears to have adjusted to the previous schedule**. The parents may **experiment** with a shared placement schedule as the child nears 5, if the child is secure and not exhibiting anxiety symptoms, or other regressive symptom such as toileting difficulties, clinging behavior, sleeping or feeding problems. A more equally shared schedule may involve alternating weeks with the non-residential parent having contact with the child 2-3 times per week, for 2-3 hours at a time. These longer blocks of time permit the child to “settle in” with each parent. Longer contacts with the non-residential parent will increase the likelihood of a higher quality relationship with that parent.

This age group is a relatively high risk group and care should be taken that the child is not exposed to conflicts between the parents, especially during exchanges. **Some children will not adapt very well to equally shared schedules, and may need one “primary” residence in order to establish a sense of security and self-confidence.** If this is the case, the child should be placed with the parent showing the highest quality of parenting—especially the parent who is most likely to provide structure and consistency, as well as demonstrate the most willingness to consult with and involve the other parent. Children in this age range require that their parents communicate well, and have similar rules, routines, and discipline.

The presence of older siblings may make it easier for younger children to tolerate longer periods away from the absent parent. Young children frequently turn to an older sibling as a temporary “parent replacement,” especially during times of stress and uncertainty. You may need to obtain professional assistance to help understand the causes of your child’s “symptoms” if one parent believes the child is not adjusting to the schedule.



5 TO 12 YEARS OLD (ELEMENTARY/EARLY MIDDLE SCHOOL)

Children in this age range may start to favor one home during school days, especially if that home is closer to school, or that parent is available after school. If so, the child may spend the predominance of school days/nights with that parent and have one longer weekend period every other week (e.g., Thursday through Monday morning, or Friday through Tuesday morning) with the non-residential parent. Other children may adapt well to a shared placement schedule (such as one week with each parent) provided parents are in close communication regarding school activities and homework, and have similar household rules and expectations. In general, longer periods of contact are better, with fewer transitions, allowing the child time to adapt to the household routine.

If a relatively equal schedule is not indicated, the non-residential parent may also have brief, non-overnight contact periods during school nights, one per week, lasting 3-4 hours, provided the child's homework and after-school activities are continued and normal bedtime is observed. Many families find these short contacts to be stressful, in that the child can never really "settle in" with the non-residential parent. These families may want to experiment with having a midweek overnight, with the non-residential parent taking the child to school the next morning.

During summer, parents may implement a more equally shared schedule **provided the child's summer activities are consistently observed by both households**. This schedule may vary from alternating every two, three or four days, or alternating weeks.

If an equal schedule is acceptable to both parents and your child, you may want to experiment with every Monday and Tuesday with one parent, Wednesday and Thursday with the other, and alternate weekends. Another option would be to spend 3 days with one parent, 4 with the other, and then reverse the schedule the next week. (See section below entitled Typical Placement Schedules for School Aged Children.)

If your child's temperament does not fit well with a shared schedule, you may need to consider having the consistency of one primary location, while attempting to ensure the ongoing involvement with the non-residential parent. This is especially true for children with anxiety disorders, children with diagnoses of ADHD, or children who are resistant to and intolerant of changes in routines. You may need a professional assessment from a child psychologist or counselor to assist you in making this determination, since parents likely will disagree on the severity of the children's symptoms. These children may do best with one home being the "school night" home. The non-residential parent however may feel excluded from the school life of the child; in that

case, having a long weekend (Thursday night through Monday morning) on alternating weeks may be indicated.

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12 YEARS TO 18 YEARS (LATE MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL)

Continue with same schedule as above, but allow more input from your teenager regarding specific days and times. Many teens tend to gravitate to one primary residence, usually one that is more accessible to school, activities, and friends. Other things being equal, many teens prefer to be at the household that has the best (and least restricted) computer access. They may request to live at the home where rules are perceived as more flexible or where there is less supervision! Be sure you check out your teen's motives behind any requests for a change in schedule.

Many teens dislike alternating between households during the week since this makes it more difficult for their friends to stay in touch with them. However, this problem may be disappearing with the advent of cell phones, Instant Messaging, and social networking sites such as Myspace! They may also have trouble remembering which house their "stuff" is at. If your teen appears to desire one primary residence (after all, they are becoming adults, and may be starting to really dislike the hassle of living out of two homes), carefully explore their motives and try to see their point of view. Remember that school, activities, and friends become primary, and regular "quality time" with parents may not be their first priority. After all, in just a few years, they WILL be "on their own!"

Often, girls may prefer the company of their mothers, and boys their fathers, during mid and late teen years. Still, teens do benefit from the active participation of both parents. Both parents should attempt to participate in the teen's after school activities, unless there is a great deal of conflict and mistrust between the parents. In that case, parents may decide to

divide the activities between them, such as Dad attending soccer, Mom attending volleyball.

NOTE: The above guidelines are guidelines only, based on research as well as the experiences of many other families. The underlying task facing you as a parent is to always attempt to safeguard the child's relationship with both parents. Surveys involving college students whose parents were divorced when they were younger reveals that the majority of them longed to have more contact with the non-residential parent. Many resented what they perceived as the residential parent's attitude regarding their relationship with the other parent. The best predictor of a child's mental health is the extent to which they enjoyed ongoing, secure contact with both parents, and experienced each parent as supporting their contact with the other.



PLACEMENT SCHEDULES FOR HIGH CONFLICT SITUATIONS

For parents who are chronically unable to cooperate, exhibit moderate to high conflict, have a history of domestic abuse, or where there is a restraining order in effect, the following modifications to the above schedules may be needed to protect your children and ensure that they adjust well to living in two homes. It is imperative that children not only are protected from being abused, but are protected from **witnessing** abusive incidents between their parents. Research suggests that the negative impact of observing physical abuse between their parents may be equal to or greater than the impact of being physically abused themselves. It is also an established fact that children do not do well with **any** placement schedule when exposed to high conflict between their parents.

Children do not do well with shared placement schedules when parents cannot easily communicate regarding the children. Shared placement schedules require frequent contact to discuss schedules, doctor's appointments, school activities, extracurricular activities.

Frequent exchanges of the child require you both to be in contact, and this may increase a risk of conflict and arguments as well as increasing the likelihood for misunderstandings regarding exchange times or places. The challenge is for you to design a schedule which limits the amount of contact between you and the other parent, while keeping the child in regular and frequent contact with that parent.

High conflict parents should consider arranging neutral setting exchanges where they have no contact with each other, using the school, sitter or daycare. For example, if weekend overnights are in place, the non-residential parent may pick the children up after school rather than at the residential parent's house. Also, a third party exchange may be arranged, utilizing a friend, relative, or the services of a visitation exchange center.

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BIRTH TO 1 ½ YEAR OLD:

Select a primary residence based on caretaking history. In most cases this would be with the mother. Dad would have 3-4 visits per week, depending on feeding and sleep schedules. If required, you should select a supervisor acceptable to both of you, preferably a "neutral" family member. After one year, child may spend overnight with non-residential parent, provided feeding and sleeping routines are consistent. The residential parent may request appropriate supervision if there are compelling reasons to suspect the non-residential parent's ability to care appropriately for the child. The court may order a "parenting competence evaluation" if there is reason to believe that the child is not receiving appropriate care.

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1 ½ YEARS TO 3 YEARS OLD:

The child may progress to alternate weekends with the non-residential parent, involving one overnight period (Saturday morning through Sunday evening). The child is returned home at a reasonable hour on Sunday night for bedtime routine (no less than one hour before the usual bedtime). The child continues with 2-3 daytime periods of contact during

intervening week. Try to avoid letting the child go longer than 3 days without seeing the non-residential parent.

If the child does not seem to be adjusting well to contacts with the non-residential parent, please see the section below entitled “Special Problems: Child Not Adjusting To Placement Schedule.”

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3 TO 5 YEARS OLD (PRESCHOOL):

Keep the primary residence based on caretaking history. Add one night to alternating weekends; e.g. Friday night through Sunday night. Consider adding an additional daytime period during the week from after daycare or preschool until one hour before bedtime. Summer schedules would be similar, although if one parent wants to take a vacation or visit relatives, consider a maximum time away from the residential parent to be no more than a week.

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5 TO 12 YEARS OLD (ELEMENTARY SCHOOL):

Keep the primary residence based on caretaking history. Add one overnight to the alternating weekends with the non-residential parent (Thursday night through Sunday evening, or Friday after school through Monday evening).

For summers, you may consider one week per month that the child can spend with the non-residential parent. At the younger age range of this group, it might help the child adjust by having him or her have contact with the residential parent once or twice during the week. Older children (ages 10 and up) may have an easier time spending a week or more away from the residential parent.

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12 TO 18 YEARS OLD (MIDDLE—HIGH SCHOOL):

Continue with the above schedule, allowing for more input from the teen regarding additional access times for the non-residential parent. Be sure you understand their motives for requesting this additional time.



Note: In families where there have been chronic violence, there is a higher likelihood that the children have been, or will become, the targets of abuse. Many victims of abuse are afraid to leave their spouse, fearing that no one will be around to protect the children and ensure their safety. In these situations, it is imperative to have the children involved in ongoing monitoring or counseling, in order to keep another set of “eyes and ears” in the potentially violent home environment.

TYPICAL PLACEMENT SCHEDULES FOR SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Here are some typical schedules which you may wish to consider for your school-aged children. Each has advantages and disadvantages, and there is really no “perfect” schedule. Be prepared to experiment and make changes to meet your and your children’s needs. You might wish to take these schedules as “starting points” for ongoing discussion with the other parent, since no one schedule fits every family’s needs.

In planning your schedule, you will need to balance the number of exchanges which take place with the length of time the children are away from each of you. As the number of exchanges increases, so does the chance of missed connections, being late, and spending more time in the car. Also, your child may complain of “bouncing”

back and forth too much. If exchanges are reduced, and the blocks of time are longer, your child may miss the other parent or develop separation anxiety. In general, the younger the child, the shorter the blocks should be, with more frequent exchanges needed. As your child grows older, he/she will likely be able to tolerate longer periods of time away from each parent, and you can then reduce the number of exchanges.

Keep in mind that your child's personality and temperament will influence how well they adapt to any schedule. Even within one family, one child may seemingly do well with a schedule, while another will not. You may need to experiment and "fine-tune" the schedule to see what works the best. If your children differ considerably in age, you might want to consider separate schedules rather than have everyone bound to the same schedule.

Your own work schedule may ultimately determine the overall structure of the children's placement schedule. If one of you are available after school to care for the children, that would be a better choice compared to having them remain with a sitter or in day care.

NOTE: These plans are provided for the typical nine-month school year for children of kindergarten age and older. Summer schedules are presented in a later section.

I. Traditional residential model:

This plan is the traditional and usually court-imposed model which presumes that one parent will be the residential parent during school days and the other parent will be the "weekend parent." One drawback is that the weekend parent is only minimally involved, if at all, in the school activities of the child, and may become perceived by the child as a "Disneyland Parent." (This illustration assumes that Mom will be the residential parent during school days.)

M=Mom D=Dad

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	M	M	M/D	D	D/M
WK 2	M	M	M/D/M	M	M	M	M
WK 3	M	M	M	M	M/D	D	D/M
WK 4	M	M	M/D/M	M	M	M	M

24 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 4 WITH DAD.

8 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.

LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM MOM: 2 DAYS

LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 9 DAYS

II. Residential model with extended time:

Children are with Mom during school days but Dad has additional time—the midweek contact is extended to overnight, and an additional overnight is added to the weekend. This gives the non-residential parent more involvement in school activities and reduces the problems of the “weekend parent” role found with the traditional schedule.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	M/D	D/M	M/D	D	D
WK 2	D/M	M	M/D	D/M	M	M	M
WK 3	M	M	M/D	D/M	M/D	D	D
WK 4	D/M	M	M/D	D/M	M	M	M

18 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 10 WITH DAD.

12 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.

LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM MOM: 3 DAYS

LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 6 DAYS

III. 5 X 2 alternating (“50/50” overnight placement)

The children are with one parent every Monday and Tuesday, with the other one every Wednesday and Thursday, and alternating weekends with each. This schedule assumes that the parents can successfully cooperate and coordinate schedules and routines, as well as assuming the children have fairly flexible personalities, and can adapt to living in two homes.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	D	D	D	D	D
WK 2	M	M	D	D	M	M	M
WK 3	M	M	D	D	D	D	D
WK 4	M	M	D	D	M	M	M

14 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 14 WITH DAD.
 8 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.
 LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM MOM: 5 DAYS
 LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 5 DAYS

IV. Alternating week with extended weekends:

The children are with one parent mainly during school nights, and have an extended weekend on alternating weekends with the non residential parent. On the weeks just prior to the extended weekend, the non-residential parent has one midweek overnight contact period to break up the week away from the child.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	M	D	D	D	D
WK 2	M	M	D	M	M	M	M
WK 3	M	M	M	D	D	D	D
WK 4	M	M	D	M	M	M	M

18 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 10 WITH DAD.
 6 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.
 LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM MOM: 4 DAYS
 LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 7 DAYS

V. 2 X 2 X 3 alternating (“50/50” overnight placement)

This pattern is similar to the above but reduces the time away from each parent to a maximum of 3 days. However, it may be more confusing in that the weekday placement periods change from week to week.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	D	D	M	M	M
WK 2	D	D	M	M	D	D	D
WK 3	M	M	D	D	M	M	M
WK 4	D	D	M	M	D	D	D

14 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 14 WITH DAD.
12 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.
LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM MOM: 3 DAYS
LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 3 DAYS

VI. Alternating week schedule (“50/50” overnight placement)

The children alternate weeks between each household, with the exchange occurring on the weekend, usually on a Sunday afternoon or evening. Some families exchange on Fridays, to allow the children the weekend to adjust to the “new” home.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
WK 2	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
WK 3	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
WK 4	D	D	D	D	D	D	D

14 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 14 WITH DAD.
4 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.
LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM MOM: 7 DAYS

LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 7 DAYS

VII. Alternating week schedule with midweek contact (“50/50” placement)

This schedule breaks up the week-long absence from each parent with a midweek dinnertime contact.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
WK 1	M	M	M/D/M	M	M	M	M
WK 2	D	D	D/M/D	D	D	D	D
WK 3	M	M	M/D/M	M	M	M	M
WK 4	D	D	D/M/D	D	D	D	D

14 OVERNIGHTS WITH MOM, 14 WITH DAD. 12 EXCHANGES PER MONTH.

LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM DAD: 4 DAYS. AWAY FROM MOM: 4 DAYS.

SUMMER SCHEDULES

There are many different options for designing summer schedules. Each parent usually will want at least a one-week block of time for a family vacation. If you have a “50/50” schedule during the school year, you may choose to continue this through the summer. If you have a primary residential-type schedule during the school year, you may want to experiment with a 50/50 schedule during the three summer months, since maintaining the consistency of a school-night residence is not necessary. Most families consider alternating week or two week periods during summer if a 50/50 schedule is indicated.

Children who are involved in summer activities will need both parents to cooperate in getting them to their various activities. It is very stressful on children to miss activities they are signed up for. If one parent is unwilling or unable to accomplish this task, then the children should be placed with the parent who is most able or willing to maintain consistency in these activities. Also, the children should be with a parent rather than with a sitter or daycare provider if that parent is available.

If you have a residential pattern during the school year, you may want to experiment with having the non-residential parent become the residential parent during the summer, and simply inverting the schedule during those months. Again, this assumes that the parents are reasonably cooperative and there is not an issue of significant conflict or antagonism between the parents.

NOTE: These guidelines are considered to be general and not applicable to all families in all situations. You will need to consider the specific factors affecting your family in following these recommendations. Please consult with a qualified mental health professional and/or your attorney for guidance in applying these recommendations to your own family circumstances.

PARENTS WHO LIVE FAR APART

A special problem occurs when parents live at a great distance away from each other. The usual arrangement is for the live-away parent to have extended holiday and summer periods with the children, usually Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter or spring breaks, or other times depending on parents' religious or cultural heritage. Older children (ages 12 and up) may adapt to spending the majority of the summer with the live-away parent, but younger children may develop separation anxiety symptoms if away from the residential parent for long periods of time. Children under the age of 5 have difficulty being away from the primary residential parent for more than a week at a time. If longer periods are desired, the residential parent may consider traveling with the child to the residence of the other parent and having periodic contacts with the child, especially if homesickness is a problem.

Usually, children will need to be back with the residential parent at least a week before the start of school, in order to do school shopping and to make the necessary emotional adjustments to living back with the residential parents. Teens may need to be back earlier since

many school functions (sports, music, etc.) may begin organizing and practicing several weeks before the official start of school.

Special note for parents of teens: Teenagers may have difficulty staying with the non-residential parent for an extended period of time during summer months. They usually like being with friends, attending summer sports and music camps, and also may have to attend summer school. They may adapt better to planning to spend several weeks with the non-residential parent for a vacation rather than spending the entire summer. Your teenager needs to have input into decisions about summer schedules.

RIGHT OF FIRST REFUSAL

Many parents adopt the doctrine of the “right of first refusal.” This means that if the children are with you and you have plans to be gone for more than several hours, or you will be going out of town on a trip, you should contact the other parent and see if they are available to care for the children. If that parent is unavailable or otherwise unwilling, you are responsible for finding alternate child care during your absence. NOTE: Do not turn your children into “timekeepers,” keeping track of the time the other parent is gone, and then calling you as soon as the “cut off” is reached! This places them in the role of “tattlers,” which should be avoided at all costs.

=====SPECIAL ISSUES=====

MY CHILD IS NOT ADJUSTING TO THE PLACEMENT SCHEDULE

One of the most common complaints is that one parent believes that the child is not adjusting to the placement time with the other parent. The child returns home tired, irritable, difficult to manage, or may “regress” to an earlier age of functioning; i.e., unable to sleep alone, waking up and crying in the night, or losing recently acquired toileting skills. The younger child may become more aggressive towards siblings or friends, or become defiant and noncompliant at home. For many young children, misbehavior is often a “cry for help,” and a careful evaluation and intervention is usually indicated if the symptoms persist for more than several weeks. There are many possible reasons this may be happening:

1. Your child may have a very sensitive temperament, may not handle changes in routines well, or may simply need more structure and predictability than most other children. Even with families made up of several children, one may be more resistant to the schedule, while the others seem to adapt very well.
2. Coming back after a weekend away, a child may have stayed up late, missed naps, and may generally be fatigued. This may take a day or two to overcome, once he/she gets back on a schedule. (Usually, the parent who has the child less often will be more likely to consider the time a “special” or “fun” time, with a corresponding reduction in rules, expectations, and adherence to routines.)
3. One house may have less rules or discipline, or be less organized, and the children may go through a period of “running wild” until they realize that your rules are now in effect. It is important to address this issue, and remind the other parent to continue with normal rules and expectations.
4. A very young child may not understand why he/she has to be away from you for such a long period of time, and may be “protesting”

being sent away by misbehaving! Often, young children misbehave in order to aggressively “invite” attention from you, fearing that they may be ignored or neglected if they don’t attract your attention.

5. A child may actually be reflecting your worry and anxiety . Young children usually mirror the moods of their caretakers. If you are anxious about your child, and communicate that anxiety, the child’s behavior will likely become more disorganized, showing up as withdrawal, acting out, irritability, or other anxiety-related symptoms.

6. Finally, most people, adults AND children, need time to adjust to transitions. You might notice that when you return from a long trip that YOU are behaving poorly at home, and have trouble getting back on track. Your child may simply be going through the same readjustment process. If that is the case, it should only take a few hours or a day to make the adjustment, depending on the personality of the child.

Don’t jump to conclusions if your child does not seem to be adapting to the schedule! Parents may often think the schedule is at fault, or that there is “something bad” happening at the other parent’s house. You may need the assistance of a counselor to help unravel the reasons behind your child’s apparent maladjustment.

If you eventually decide that the cause of your child’s symptoms is an inappropriate placement schedule, you may want to experiment with changing the schedule. If your child is not adapting to the frequency of exchanges (the “bouncing back and forth” syndrome), try reducing the exchanges and lengthening the blocks of time the child is with each parent. If the cause of the problem appears to be that the child is away from one of you for too long, and is needing to go through a “reattachment” process, try reducing the lengths of the block of time and increasing the frequency. It is best if you can work this out informally with the other parent, or utilizing the services of a mediator, rather than obtaining legal intervention. However, if the other parent refuses to consider your proposal, legal intervention may be needed.

If the child is not adapting to a “50/50” or shared schedule, and the above interventions fail to correct the problem, you may need to revert temporarily to a “primary household” for the child, reducing the amount of contact with one parent. This is usually quite difficult to

accomplish, since no one wants to be the parent who has to reduce contact with his/her child. Again, input from a trained professional, and possibly court-imposed interventions, may be the only solution.

PREVIOUSLY UNINVOLVED PARENT SEEKS MORE TIME WITH CHILDREN

Often the crisis of a separation or divorce will “wake up” one parent who has not been previously involved in the ongoing care of the children. The “primary” caretaking parent usually will react with suspicion, saying “well, he wasn’t involved before, why should he be involved now?” Or, “he is just doing this to harass me and get his child support reduced.” In the long run, children will usually benefit from a more equal involvement by both parents, even if it was late in coming. And from the children’s point of view, “better late than never.” One of the biggest mistakes the previously less-involved parent may make is “moving too fast” or trying to make up for lost time. It is very important to equalize parenting responsibilities gradually over a period of time to reduce the stress on the children. Moving quickly to a shared time arrangement is usually not a good idea for either parents or children. Gradually increasing the time-sharing between parents may prove less harmful to the children, and may make for a more secure relationship between the children and both parents.

Sadly, there are situations however where it may be in the children’s best interests to limit the involvement of the other parent, if there are serious questions about his or her ability to parent the children. There may be drug and alcohol issues, risks of child abuse, anger management problems, or other problems that will have to be carefully assessed. The negative impact of the children’s contact with that parent may overcome the advantage of the children having an ongoing relationship with that parent. Professional guidance is usually required in situations such as these.

SHOULD WE ALWAYS KEEP THE CHILDREN TOGETHER?

Most experts agree that it is usually a good idea to keep the children together in terms of a placement schedule. Brothers and sisters do

rely on each other for emotional support, even if sometimes it seems that “all they do is argue!” Dividing them up (“You take Mary and I’ll take John”) may hurt them in the long run. However, if there is a large range of ages in your household, you may want to consider developing separate schedules, allowing older children (teens) to have more say or flexibility in the schedule, or allowing longer blocks of time at each residence.

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QUESTIONS PARENTS HAVE ABOUT CUSTODY AND PLACEMENT

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Can children really adjust to going back and forth between two homes? Don't children do better with living primarily in just one home?

The research that exists today is contradictory. Many experts believe that there is really no conclusive evidence which indicates that children need "one primary home," or, for that matter, one "primary parent." It appears to be true that children can attach and bond with more than one caretaker, and that they can bond equally well to both fathers and mothers, assuming both are willing, capable, and available. Whether this also means that children can then learn to easily adapt to living in two homes has not been confirmed by research. Some parents report that their children seem to adapt well, even at very early ages, to living in two homes, but other parents report that some or all of their children do not adapt to "going back and forth." Some children as teenagers report never feeling like they had a "home," or complain about having developed two "identities" (one for Mom, one for Dad), with the result that they do not have a firm conception of who they really are! Most parents do admit, however, that they themselves would have difficulty living out of two homes, and wonder how their children could manage it over the years.

Parents need to keep an open mind about this issue, perhaps experimenting over time with various placement arrangements. Children's ability to adapt to "two homes" may depend more on their own personality and temperament, their parent's ability to communicate and work together, the need to maintain a flexible attitude, and other factors specific to your family's needs. Be sensitive to the fact that your child may be struggling with two competing

needs: a need to be close to each one of you, and a need to have one place to call “home.” Research does tell us that most young adults whose parents were divorced missed having contact with one parent (in most cases the father), and most of these young adults felt that a more shared placement schedule would have been preferable.

How can we make the transitions or exchanges less stressful for both ourselves and our children?

Children often report that the most stressful aspects of living in two homes involve the transitions back and forth between households. Many young children do not adapt well to transitions of any sort, so we need to make these changes go smoothly with as little trauma as possible. It helps to have a predictable schedule in place and stick to it, unless there are compelling reasons to change it. Many families place a calendar in a visible location (such as on the refrigerator) with Dad’s times marked in one color and Mom’s times with another.

Help your child get ready for the pick up or drop off about half an hour ahead of time so there won’t be a last minute rush. Do NOT use the exchange periods to bring up sensitive topics with the other parent. Make the changes matter-of-fact, much like sending your child off to school, or to a sleepover. Don’t engage in long, drawn out “good-byes.” Try not to look too sad or unhappy when sending your child to the other parent, for children often worry about the parent they are leaving behind. Finally, you may want to consider using school or daycare as the exchange medium, with one parent taking the child in the mornings, the other parent picking up after school in the afternoons. Many children make the transition much better this way rather than having to change between two households.

In designing placement schedules, shouldn’t we keep all the children together as a group, or should we have the children spend individual time with each parent?

Normally, children will change households together, but there are special circumstances where you might want to consider having them go separately. If there is a fairly large age spread in your family, your older child may want to have his or her “own” time with each parent

without the younger siblings around. Children of all ages often enjoy special one-on-one times with each parent, engaging in some mutually enjoyable activity. There may also be situations where siblings are not getting along very well, and it may provide some relief for a parent to have only one of them for some of the placement periods.

Usually children derive a great deal of support from one another when negotiating the stress of living in two homes. Young children seem to do better with the transitions when they can rely on older siblings for support. Be careful, however, in giving the oldest child too much parental responsibility in caring for the younger kids.

How can I tell if my child needs counseling?

Most children who have experienced a separation or divorce in the family may find value in having several meetings with a counselor skilled in divorce issues. Children may be struggling with significant feelings of grief and loss, even though to their parents they may appear to be doing OK. Research studies indicate that girls tend to appear to be doing well, keeping their feelings inside, whereas boys are more likely to act up and let others know that things are not good. Also, children may not want to add to their parents' worries by appearing too sad or upset, so therefore may try hard to hide their feelings and "put on a happy face." Younger children often show their distress by misbehaving more, whining, being "clingy," and being unable to sleep alone. Having your children meet with a counselor for a few sessions may be helpful both to you and your children.

If your child appears to be exhibiting ongoing changes in mood, attitude or behavior, to the point where the child is obviously unhappy, or is making other people's lives difficult, and if these symptoms persist for at least a week or two, then you certainly should consider a psychological consultation in order to rule out serious problems. In cases such as this, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! Competent child counselors will involve both parents in the treatment, and will meet with them to discuss parenting interventions they can make at home.

Teens may develop depression, experience a decline in academic performance, or become more likely to engage in risky or self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol use or premature sexual experimentation.. Younger children may experience depression which may appear as moodiness, inability to sleep alone, irritability, aggressiveness towards peers or siblings, and, in very young children, excessive clinging to a parent or other caretaker, loss of toilet training skills, headaches and stomach aches. Often a telephone call to a counselor with a description of the symptoms you are observing may enable you to make a good decision regarding whether counseling is necessary.

As a final note, it is quite common for children to be disruptive, anxious, tired, and defiant for awhile following a period of time with the other parent. If your child is quite young (under five), and shows signs of separation anxiety, the placement schedule may not be appropriate for the age of the child, and a professional consultation may be needed.

My child does not seem to be adjusting well to the transitions. What can I do?

Many children have problems handling changes in routines. Some children need a great deal of structure and predictability in their lives. Others are very slow to “warm up” or adapt to change. Within one family, you may have one child who has little trouble adjusting to changes in routines, while another child becomes irritable and difficult anytime there is a significant disruption in their routine. Preparing the child for the transition well in advance, or easing the stress of the change by involving the child in a “fun” activity right after the exchange may help. Some parents use school, sitter or daycare as a natural transition point rather than exchanging the children between the two homes.

Some families ease the problems with transitions by reducing the number of transitions and increasing the length of time the child is with each parent. You may need to experiment with various arrangements in order to find the best alternative.

How do we involve grandparents and other relatives in the children's lives in designing a placement schedule?

It is very important to keep the child in contact with friends and relatives following a separation or divorce. Usually each parent is responsible for keeping the children in contact with relatives and friends on "their" side when they have the children. It is also important that friends and relatives attempt to "stay out of the middle," and attempt to maintain their own individual relationship with the kids. Sadly, some grandparents become alienated from their children, as well as their grandchildren, and may need to utilize legal remedies, such as grandparent visitation orders, in order to protect their relationship with their grandchildren. Parents should strive to help the children maintain relationships with relatives on both sides.

It is important that friends and relatives not share their feelings directly with the children regarding their parents. In particular, they should try not to say negative things about the children's parents in front of them, or to other individuals if the children are within earshot.

I would like to move to another city. How will this affect my children?

If at all possible, delay moving! Moving away creates severe stress for children. In a nutshell, children may experience this as "losing" one of their parents. From a child's point of view, not being able to see each parent on a regular basis constitutes a serious loss, which may take years to recover from. Children also may resent the moving parent for having removed them from ongoing contact with the parent left behind.

The need to keep the children in regular and consistent contact with both parents (which is one of the most important predictors of mental health) may, of course, need to be balanced with the rights of either parent to pursue their educational or occupational goals. If all factors have been considered and a parent has decided that the ONLY outcome is a move, then the following plans need to be implemented to reduce the harm to the children: parents will need to devote themselves to a consistent and regular travel plan to keep the

children in contact with the non-residential parent. Depending on the age of the child, spending most of the summer with the non-residential parent, as well as major holidays, will go a long way in preventing the sense of loss children feel when being taken away from one parent. Also, maintaining regular contact via phone calls, email, videotapes, and video conferencing will lessen the sense of loss that children feel.

Should I ask the children where they want to live?

In general, no! Phrasing the question in this manner artificially creates a win-lose choice that no child should have to confront. Asking a child this question would be similar to asking a parent to “choose” between two of his or her children, something which no parent could ever do! You can help your child adjust to the terrible reality of divorce by not putting them in the position of “choosing parents.” Most parents usually find out that right after they discipline their child, he or she may blurt out “well I will just go over to Dad’s house!” or “I’m going to call my mother!” Don’t take this seriously, these comments are made in anger, and usually happen in homes where parents are still married!

My child is asking me to let him spend more time with the other parent. Should I?

There are MANY reasons children make this request, some valid, some not. One usually valid reason is that many children who live primarily with one parent over time will develop a desire or longing to spend more time with the other parent. Perhaps they are growing up with a deep fear that they will have never fully known one parent, or perhaps they are fearful that that parent may drift away, eventually abandoning them. This is especially true if that parent has since remarried and has had children with their new spouse. Many children feel “replaced” if that parent does not take special steps to remain in ongoing contact.

There are other motives that are less valid, including wanting to live where there are more freedoms and less rules, wanting to live closer

to friends, wanting to live with a parent to take care of or protect that parent, and wanting to “make things equal.” If you are unsure as to your child’s motives, have him or her talk with a professional counselor skilled in these matters to advise you regarding how seriously to take these comments.

My child is refusing to spend time with the other parent. What can I do?

Most parents report that children will at times refuse to go to the other parent’s house. Some reasons are valid, most are not. There are two types of mistakes you can make in a situation such as this. If you force the child to go when there are actually legitimate reasons for him or her not to, you may be endangering the child’s mental or physical health. It is sometimes quite difficult to figure out why the child is refusing to go. Children often go through anxious periods and may do quite well for awhile, and then for no apparent reason refuse to go. Children may also “hold themselves hostage” in order to punish the other parent for some perceived wrongdoing. If one child blames the other parent for the divorce, they often will refuse to visit, wanting to support and “take sides with” the parent who was left.

I believe that the other parent is trying to alienate the children against me. What can I do?

Parental alienation is a serious problem which usually needs professional intervention. Children do often align themselves with one parent or another for a variety of reasons, some valid, some not. If you believe that one parent is trying to directly or indirectly turn the children against the other parent, you will need to have the children see a counselor skilled in identifying the degree of alienation which is occurring, as well as assisting you in developing some interventions. In more extreme cases, legal intervention may be needed, since alienating behavior usually does not resolve itself without some type of outside intervention.

It is normal for children to ally themselves with one parent. Sometimes this occurs along gender lines, as when your son wishes to be with his father to do “guy things,” or when your daughter wants

to spend alone time with her mother. Occasionally, children may gravitate towards the parent they believe is the “victim” (a parent may intentionally communicate this attitude), and refuse to spend time with the parent they feel is to blame for the divorce. Or they may worry about the parent who is home alone when they are at the other parent’s house. Again, seek professional consultation to help you decide if alienation is a significant problem.

Interestingly, in some cases of alienation, the symptoms disappear with time, or the children may eventually revolt against the parent who is attempting to alienate them from the other parent.

As parents, we belong to two different religious faiths. How will we agree to raise our children in two different religious traditions?

Traditionally, the parent who has the children on his/her weekend usually is responsible for making decisions regarding where and how they practice their faith. Children look forward (especially when younger) to sharing religious experiences with their parents. Only when one religious faith seeks to undermine or alienate the child against the other religious faith is there potential for problems. The court may intervene to disallow the children from participating in the “alienating” religion in extreme cases. Professional assessment of the children may be necessary to discover the extent to which the child is being alienated from the other parent for religious reasons. Remember also that pre-teen and teen-aged children will prefer to attend the church (and associated youth group activities) that their close friends attend.

I believe that the other parent is using alcohol or drugs. Is there some way I can make sure the children are safe while with that parent?

Concerns about alcohol or drug use usually require professional assessment by a qualified AODA (alcohol or other drug abuse)

counselor. Usually, courts will require assessments if there is any evidence of significant alcohol or drug use by a parent. A thorough assessment usually involves several interviews, completion of alcohol or drug use assessment instruments, and contacts with other family members for collateral information.

Most court jurisdictions will not require alcohol assessments unless there is evidence that the parent's chemical use directly affects their care of the children. If you believe the other parent's drinking has become a danger to the children, you may request that a court order that parent to obtain a full alcohol or drug assessment. The outcome of the assessment may range from a recommendation for outpatient therapy to inpatient treatment or hospitalization. Periodic alcohol or drug screens may be required to ensure the parent remains chemical free during the period he/she has responsibility for the children. Having your children meet periodically with a therapist skilled in drug and alcohol issues and how chemical use affects family functioning is advised, both to educate your children about these issues as well as monitor their adjustment.

My ex-partner emotionally and verbally abused me while we were married. Won't my children be subject to the same abuse? How can I protect them?

There is a significant likelihood that parents who physically abuse each other may do the same to their children. It is just as significant that children who witness this abuse will develop serious emotional difficulties if the abuse is not addressed. You can best protect your children by insisting that the abusing parent be fully evaluated by a competent evaluator skilled in domestic abuse issues. Still, many parents abuse each other, physically and/or emotionally, yet do not perpetrate this same abuse upon the children. Your best course of action is to have the children involved in an ongoing and trusting relationship with a professional counselor who can advise you regarding the presence of any form of abuse or risk to the children.

Remember that there are "varieties" of abuse, ranging from chronic violent "battering" lasting years, to "single episode" violence occurring on or around the time of the separation. Any form of violence,

including verbal intimidation or threats, needs to be evaluated fully by a competent professional. Courts may require this assessment, participation in counseling or anger management treatment, supervised placement periods, and other interventions needed to protect you and your children.

How can we learn to communicate better regarding the children?

This is perhaps the most important question you will ever address, in that effective communication regarding the children is one of the most important predictors of how your kids will turn out! There are many programs and books available in most communities which can help you in achieving the goal of “good enough” communication with the children’s other parent. You might want to remind the other parent that the children need their parents to give good advice to each other, and serve as “checks and balances” on each other. Here are some tips for promoting good communication with your ex:

- Set aside a time, at least weekly, to share information about the children, either in person or over the phone.
- Focus only on topics related to the care of the children, and do not bring up issues from the past. Use the same style you would use in sharing information with your child’s teacher or day care provider.
- If you have a concern about the care the children are receiving at the other parent’s house, share this in a tentative and inquiring manner, in order to reduce defensiveness. Do not expect the other parent to say “Well, thanks for reminding me of this, I will certainly try and remedy the situation!” Perhaps, however, you have planted a “seed” which will enable the other parent to be more aware of the problem.
- Try using a notebook to send back and forth with the children during the exchange, outlining specific issues pertinent to the children’s welfare. Follow the guidelines in “b” above.

- Use email to communicate information, and this will also provide you with a record of issues which have been discussed.
- Participate in a communications class or workshop offered in your community.

Are there any alternatives to the adversarial legal process to helping us decide custody and placement issues?

It is usually not necessary to end up in court when you disagree with the other parent regarding the children's placement. Court hearings are a last resort for families who have tried many other less destructive and expensive methods. Mediation or mediation coupled with arbitration may help you solve most differences. Using attorneys who present themselves as interested in collaboration rather than taking your case to trial will help. Obtaining the input of a qualified mental health expert to assist you in mediation—this option is useful if you would like someone who can give you expert opinions regarding what is best for your children. If these interventions are not successful, a custody evaluation may be indicated. Most states either require, or allow provisions for, the appointment of a Guardian ad litem, typically an attorney who will complete an investigation and render opinions regarding what is in the best interests of the child. Often the GAL will meet with the parents in an effort to achieve a stipulated agreement without the necessity of a court hearing. Remember that the cost (financial and emotional) of a court hearing may not be worth the risk of placing the decision in the hands of a judge who knows little about your children's needs.

What do judges consider to be the most important factors in deciding issues of custody and placement?

The answer to this question depends somewhat on the state which has jurisdiction over your case. Most state now have a presumption of joint custody, and many states, including Wisconsin, mandate judges to create a placement schedule which "maximizes" contact with both parents. Barring significant issues of parental competence (such as alcohol or drug abuse, history of violence, or parental pathology), judges increasingly see the importance of having both parents involved fully in the upbringing of their children.

Accordingly, most judges place high value on how cooperative a parent is, how much a parent seeks to support and encourage the involvement of the other parent, and what steps that parent has taken to keep the children out of the middle of the conflict.

The past pattern of parental involvement will also be considered—the extent to which you managed the day-to-day demands and challenges of parenting, including shopping for the kids, attending school functions, making medical appointments, arranging for sitters and daycare, getting up in the night with sick children, etc. In many traditional families, mothers were responsible for most of the day-to-day “logistical” activities affecting the children, while fathers worked hard, “bringing home the bacon,” and assisting in childrearing activities as needed. In terms of parenting, fathers typically engaged the children in activities, outdoor adventures, hunting and fishing, sporting activities, and encouraging and challenging children to try new things. Research clearly indicates that the best arrangement for children is the active involvement of both parents in their children’s lives.

Will a “50/50” placement schedule work for our children?

Over the past ten or so years, there has been a move on the part of fathers to assume a more active role in the upbringing of their children. Most parents do not want to simply relegate the role of fathers being “weekend parents.” As more families arrange shared placement schedules, many fathers insist on a “50/50” schedule, believing that such an arrangement is only fair, and will ensure that they are equally important in their children’s lives. And many children express a desire for an equal arrangement, thinking that this is fair and will end the quarreling between their parents.

There are some advantages to having a more equalized placement schedule. Older children generally report being happier that both parents were significantly involved in their lives, rather than one parent being “left out.” Young adults whose parents were divorced often report a distinct sadness related to not having had a full relationship with one parent (typically the father). And parents often report that it is nice having the other parent more fully involved in the

day-to-day care of the children, so that they don't have to carry this burden alone. However, these findings do not necessarily imply that an exact 50/50 arrangement is needed.

There are, however, some possible risks. Many children do not do well traveling back and forth between two homes. This is especially true if the parenting atmospheres are significantly different between the two households, or if there is ongoing conflict between the parents. Many teens simply want "one place" to call home, and long for the stability that having "one home" offers. Your child may be having problems with school work, and may need the attention and consistency that one week-night household can provide. Other kids may do well in school no matter which household they are coming from. Also, as children grow up, it is natural for them to vary in their attachment to their parents. For example, a little boy who was more attached to, and dependent on, his mother while young, may long for more time with his father as he gets older. Young girls may wish to spend more quality time with their mothers as they enter their preteen years. Parents will need to be sensitive to the varying needs of their children, rather than blindly insisting on their "rights" to an equal placement schedule.

You will need to weigh the risks and benefits of supporting a more shared placement schedule for your own particular family needs. Seeking the advice of experienced professionals in the field will help you come to an informed decision.

Should children be allowed to decide their own placement plan?

Yes and no! Older children should have some input into the discussions about schedules, but be advised that sometimes the reasons for their opinions may not be "good." For example, a child may express a wish to spend more time with one parent because they worry about that parent being alone, they worry about that parent being sad, or they see that parent as being a "victim" in the divorce process. Older kids may express a desire to live with one parent because that parent allows more freedom, requires less chores, or simply lives closer to his or her friends. It might be good to follow the "school rule," in that children cannot decide when and

where to attend school, but we will listen to their wishes and opinions about problems they are having at school, and intervene accordingly.

Also, few states allow children to decide “where they live.” Usually children have this right once they turn 18 or graduate from high school, whichever occurs last. However, parents (and courts) will give increasing weight to children’s expressed desires, without giving them the power to make the decision.

I am seldom informed about school activities, appointments, or other issues affecting my child. How can I get the other parent to keep me “in the loop?”

This is a common complaint often heard by the “non-residential” parent. If gentle reminders to keep you informed don’t seem to be working, try and maintain direct contact yourself with the school, with coaches, scout leaders, etc. Call your child’s teacher once every week or two and ask how your child is doing. Find a time your child’s teacher is available, usually before school, during breaks or prep time, or after school is out. Ask the school office to send you notices and announcements directly. With teens, you can ask them about upcoming events and activities. If your child is getting counseling, ask to meet with the child’s counselor occasionally to get updates on counseling progress, or stay in touch using email or by leaving voice messages. Do not rely entirely on the other parent to keep you informed.

What can we learn from adults who themselves have experienced a divorce, so that we don’t repeat the same mistakes THEIR parents may have made?

Experiences gleaned from hundreds of adults who grew up in two households have this advice to give:

“Don’t put your kids in the middle, or turn them into “pieces of property” to be traded or negotiated back and forth. Don’t discuss adult issues with them, such as child support. Do make them your priority and try and put their needs before yours. Take the long view as to what is in their best interests and carefully pick your battles! Stay involved in their lives and show an interest in their activities. And

never argue or fight in front of them, for they will remember these incidents forever. Avoid moving far away from the other parent. Reassure them that it is not their fault that their parents cannot get along. Take advantage of mediators and counselors to resolve your differences. And don't stay together "for the sake of the children!" Remember, you are not necessarily putting your children at risk by getting a divorce—how things turn out depends largely on how you and the other parent cooperate together on behalf of your children."

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