



The Parenting Plan

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01

What is a Parenting Plan?

- A Parenting Plan is a written plan worked out between parents (and sometimes grandparents and other family members) after they separate. The Plan covers practical issues of parenting.
- It asks you to think about your children and, based on their sex, ages and personalities, what they are likely to need.
- A Parenting Plan must put the best interests of the child first.
- A Parenting Plan sets out a shared commitment to your children and their future.

Why make a Parenting Plan?

- A Parenting Plan can help you in dealings with your children's other parent or carer.
- Divorce and separation are painful for everyone involved – particularly children, who need support, love and good relationships with both parents.
- Conflict between parents hurts children.
- It is very important that everyone has some certainty about the future.
- A written Parenting Plan, worked out between parents, will help clarify the arrangements you need to put in place to care for your children.
- It will help everyone involved to know what is expected of them and it will be a valuable reference as time passes and circumstances change.

If you would prefer to work on an online version of his plan you can go to the Splitting Up? Put Kids First website (www.splittingup-putkidsfirst.org.uk/parenting-plan)

What does it consist of?

Your Plan will set out practical decisions about children's care in areas such as:

- communication and dealing with differences;
- living arrangements – who your child will spend time with (including other family members such as grandparents), how often and when;
- money;
- religion;
- education;
- health care; and
- emotional well-being.



What is not covered in a Parenting Plan?

A Parenting Plan does not cover how you intend to divide up your money, home and assets.

02

Thinking about safety

Staying safe

It is usually best when parents develop a co-operative parenting relationship. However, situations that need special consideration include where there has been:

- domestic violence or abuse (physical, emotional, sexual or financial) towards a parent;
- physical, emotional or sexual abuse of a child;
- substance misuse issues;
- child neglect or abandonment.

Although it is important for children to maintain a loving relationship with both parents, the children's safety and their physical and emotional wellbeing should always come first.

Before going any further with the Parenting Plan you should consider the following:

Do you believe that any person who is in contact with your children, or might be in the future, will put you or your children at risk of harm from any of the following?

- **Any form of domestic abuse or violence**
- **Any actual or attempted child abduction**
- **Any child abuse**
- **The abuse of drugs, alcohol or other substance misuse**
- **Any other safety or welfare concerns**



Moving forward

If you have answered no to all of these questions, you should be able to proceed with this Plan.

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, or are not sure what any of them mean or what your answer is, you should get further help. There is a list of organisations offering help on the Sorting Out Separation website (www.sortingoutseparation.org.uk/en/hub.aspx).

Answering yes to any of the questions above may not necessarily be a barrier to co-operative parenting, but you may need specialist help before considering the next steps.

You may already have thought about these issues with a dispute-resolution service (for example mediation or a contact centre). If you contact a dispute-resolution service in future, they will check these questions again with you and give you the opportunity to raise any concerns. None of these services will ask former partners to work together without being sure that it is safe, and that you both agree.

03

Drawing up a Parenting Plan

How do I draw up a Parenting Plan?

Parenting Plans can be worked out between parents:

- on their own; or
- with help from a dispute-resolution service.

You can also attend a Separated Parents Information Programme (SPIP) (see page 10).

The plan can be worked out:

- face-to-face;
- by telephone;
- online;
- by email.



When should I draw up a Plan?

You can draw up a plan at any point.

You can make the Plan in sections as you need to. It is much better to make a workable short-term plan (for example about arrangements for each parent to spend time with your children) than wait until you have a perfect Plan about everything. When you are sorting things out with the other parent or carer you can review what you have already agreed and make changes as necessary.

Before you start, think about whether you are ready to make a plan.

- Can you listen to each other?
- Can you listen to your children and agree what they might need?
- Can you negotiate equally?

There is help available on the Sorting Out Separation website (www.sortingoutseparation.org.uk/en/hub.aspx).

Separated Parents Information Programme



Across England there is a network of skilled, trained and experienced voluntary organisations that deliver the Separated Parents Information Programme (SPIP). The programme is not about your parenting skills, but it does give you information and ideas about co-parenting and the help that is available for you. Almost all of the 50,000 people who have taken the course have given positive feedback and said that they wished they had taken part sooner even when they were reluctant to attend at first.

The programme works best if both parents attend the sessions. This is because there will be things that you each may need to know more about, and each also need to consider about the other person's view. You will always be in separate groups. The person leading the group will help you to think about possible next steps.

A group might be suggested to you by a mediation service, a relationships service or a child contact centre. There is a leaflet explaining more about SPIPs on the Cafcass website (www.cafcass.gov.uk).

Mediation

Family mediation is a very common way of settling differences during and after separation or divorce. A trained mediator will help you and the other parent or carer agree on arrangements for looking after your children.

A mediator is a qualified independent person who will not take sides or try to get you back together. Mediation can help you and the other parent or carer to agree arrangements for your children by talking things through. A mediator will not tell you what to do but can help you and the other parent or carer to make agreements that are best for your children.

A trained mediator helps you and the other person to talk about the things you cannot agree on between yourselves. The mediator will help you both see if there is any way that you could agree with each other.

Not all cases are suitable for mediation, especially if there has been violence in the relationship or there are other serious welfare concerns. The mediator will be able to help you decide if your circumstances are suitable for mediation and will not start mediation if they think it is not appropriate.

There is a fee for mediation but you may be able to get legal aid to help pay for it. For more information on legal aid, visit www.gov.uk/legal-aid. To find your nearest family mediator, visit www.familymediationhelpline.co.uk/find-service.php



Help with communicating

Being able to make effective plans relies on good communication between both parents. Thinking about these skills might help:

The Skills to Get it Right for our Children: skills to manage conflict and communicate well

Stay calm:

- Relax your shoulders.
- Breathe through your diaphragm rather than shallowly through your chest.
- Take deep breaths and deliberately breathe more slowly.

Learn to listen:

- Try to focus, so your attention isn't divided.
- Take a position of curiosity: you might be surprised or wrong about what you expect to hear.
- Only listen: if you are talking it means you can't be listening – you can't do both at once!
- Take your turn to talk **after** you've listened: you are more likely to be listened to if you've listened well yourself.
- Leave pauses and don't jump into the other person's pauses.

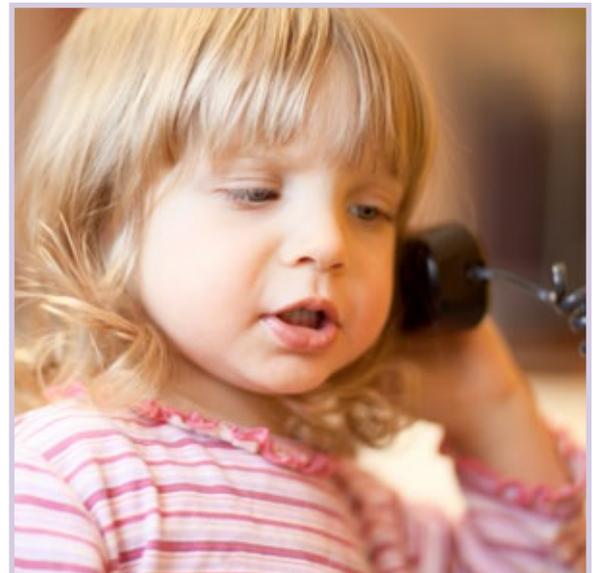
Speak for yourself using "I" statements

Phrase things in a way that is about what you think or have noted or want, not what you assume or know the other person does!

For example: "I get angry when you ask me about my money in front of the children".

rather than

"You always try to stir things up by asking about money. You know I hate it!"





Be clear, stick to the point, stick to the rules:

- Make requests simple and clear.
- Observe simple rules of courtesy (be business-like).
- Stick to one subject.
- Think about the most important point. Stick to that point – take one thing at a time.
- Do not give in to the urge to interrupt. Take deep breaths and bite your tongue.
- Avoid speaking too soon, too often or for too long. Keep things short and simple.

When there is deadlock, though you will hope that the other parent will come round, take a small time-out.

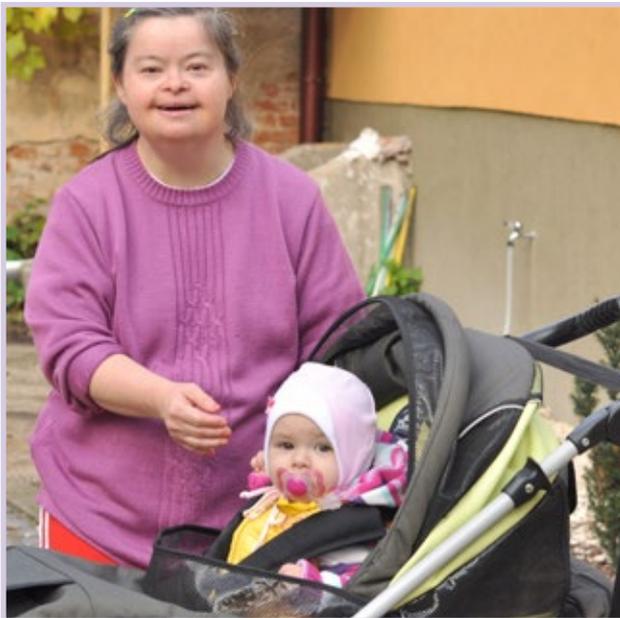
- Take a deep breath, stop, and think: what can I do about this situation?

When you have decided what you can do, follow the rules below:

- Phrase it in 'offer form' (for example "I can check with the school for you to see if they have your new email").
- Remember to be polite and business-like.
- Make sure that you both have the background information you need and reflect on what might work for you and for your children.
- Attend a SPIP (you don't have to do this at the same time). Think about what you found useful from the SPIP and what you might do next. Let the other parent know what you are doing.
- If communication is difficult, there is online help available on the Getting it Right for Children website (<http://theparentconnection.org.uk/programmes/programmes/getting-it-right-for-children-when-parents-part>) or you can talk to a mediator, or a relationship service, who may be able to help. Again, you do not both need to do this at the same time.
- This may take some time and can be quite difficult to do. Take small steps and focus on what you can do for your children. Going to court rarely improves communication and can make it worse.

Principles for your Plan

- Think about the needs of each of your children.
- Your Plan will be unique – no two parents and no two children are the same.
- The Plan should be practical, simple and as concrete as possible.
- You can make it as detailed as you like. The more detailed it is, the clearer it will be, but you may need to review it more often.
- Let your children have a say. Research shows it can be beneficial for everyone if they are given safe opportunities, free from loyalty issues, to express how things are for them. This is very different from asking children to make decisions. It is important to listen to your children.



Your completed Plan

When you have completed your Parenting Plan you should photocopy it and both keep a copy for reference.

Going forward

Changes and review

As your circumstances change, your Plan will need to reflect the changes.

You can review your Parenting Plan at any time, providing you both agree. Some parents prefer not to set a formal review date.

Questions to ask

The questions set out on the following pages are designed to act as prompts for you to consider when working on your plan.

Your plan

We are the parents of:

[child's name]	[date of birth]

We respect each other as parents and our significance in the lives of our children.

We have drawn up this Parenting Plan to assist us in providing a loving, stable, caring and safe environment for our children, in line with their age and needs.

We recognise our children's rights to:

- emotional and physical safety, stability and security;
- feel loved by both of us and significant family members;
- know and be cared for by both of us and significant family members; and
- develop independent and meaningful relationships with each of us

As parents we accept responsibility for:

- our children's physical care, health and safety;
- our children's emotional stability;
- our children's changing needs as they grow and mature;
- protecting our children so they are not exposed to harmful parental conflict that is prolonged or aggressive;
- co-operating with each other to make decisions in our children's best interests; and
- respecting our children's relationship with each of us.

We have an existing Parenting Plan dated [insert date]. We will review this Plan on [insert date] (optional, see page 14).

Safety

We have considered our safety and welfare and that of the children and agree that we can safely work together.

[signature of parent]	[date]
[signature of parent]	[date]

Questions to ask...

about communication

- What parenting decisions do we need to consult each other on?
- What parenting decisions don't we need to consult each other about?
- How are we going to behave towards each other in front of the children? We want them to know we are getting along and have them in mind.
- How are we going to share important information with each other, (for example, school reports, health issues)?
- Do we need regular meetings to discuss parenting issues?
- How do we find out what the children want to happen, and make sure that they have a say in what we decide?
- At what times is it OK to call the other parent and when isn't it OK?
- How will we settle disputes?
- Should we discuss how we talk to the children about the other parent?
- How will we talk to the children about the arrangements we have made?
- What do we do about emergencies, (for example, medical, dental, or accidents)?
- How will we make sure our children stay in contact with supportive friends or relatives from the other side of the family?
- How will we introduce new partners to our children's lives?
- Are there any important rules that we consider essential for the children, (for example, bedtimes, when homework is done, staying out late)? Do we agree that these rules are followed?
- How do we work together to make the big decisions, (for example, school, course selection and careers advice)?

Questions to ask...

about living and childcare arrangements

- Will there be a main place where the children will live and if so, where will it be?
- If neither of us can look after the children, who will be the alternative carers?
What about school holidays?
- Are there times when it is not convenient to ring our children?
- What sort of communication will we have with the children – phone, text, email – and about how often and when can they expect it?
- How much time can each child spend with each parent?
- What days can they be with each of us?
- How do we make sure that the children can share special days – birthdays and religious festivals – with both of us?
- What different ideas are there for maintaining close and meaningful contact, even when children and parents are separated for long periods of time?
- How will we manage the arrangement when one parent works long hours?
- What clothes and other belongings will be taken and returned at changeover?
- How will we arrange pick-up and drop-offs?
- Who will take them to regular sporting engagements on weekends? After school?
- When and how are we making sure the children are seeing their grandparents?
- Will anyone else look after the children (for example, childminders, babysitters, relatives, new partners, friends and neighbours)? If so, when?
- What are the arrangements for the children during the school holidays? (Consider bank holidays and teacher training days as well as school holidays).
- How do we make sure that we both have holidays with the children, and plan for taking the children abroad if we agree?





We are interested in your views about this Parenting Plan and the services that are available to you. We want to know what works and what doesn't. Please let us know your comments:

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