

A photograph of a family walking away from the camera in a grassy field during sunset. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light. A young girl in a white dress and a young boy in a white shirt and plaid shorts are holding hands in the center. They are flanked by the legs and lower bodies of adults, suggesting a family unit. The background shows silhouettes of trees against the bright sky.

Fresh Start Mediation Parenting Guide



We know the very beginning of a divorce or separation can be overwhelming.

We've put together this guide to help you make arrangements to ensure your children are cared for, happy and able to thrive.

If you would like a co-parenting coaching session to discuss any aspect of separated parenting, please get in touch.

Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Parenting goals
- 3 Living arrangements
- 4 Holidays
- 5 Special occasions
- 6 Health
- 7 Education
- 8 Child maintenance
- 9 Values, beliefs and behaviour
- 10 Communication
- 11 Get in touch

Contents



Introduction

What is a Parenting Plan?

A Parenting Plan is a written agreement made by parents who are in the process of separating or divorcing over how to co-parent their children during and after the breakup.

The Parenting Plan is a point of reference, a template that can be referred to, added to, revised and updated in whatever ways are needed as your children grow and develop and as your family circumstances change.

A Parenting Plan puts on record the fact that one key area of your relationship is not ending, despite your separation or divorce - your role as parents to the children.

Do we need a Parenting Plan?

Understanding what your children are going through can be difficult when you're struggling to make sense of your own feelings and when you have so much else to think about. A Parenting Plan can help set priorities and give structure for onward life – however uncertain at the time.

Parenting your children won't wait – they are watching now for how you cope and what you do, making assumptions about how life will be and what kind of a relationship they will have with you both in the new world. You are determining their safety, security and sense of confidence in the future.

You can use this guide to write your Parenting Plan or book a [coaching session](#).

Visit freshstartmediation.ca or call us 403.863.9700 to talk through the options.



Introduction



Parenting goals

Parenting goals

Take time to answer the questions below;

What do your children need to thrive and be happy?

How are you going to parent your children - are you each going to have your own rules when you see the children and parent independently. Or, are you going to parent with a common set of rules?

There isn't a right or wrong answer. Sometimes, what you'd like to do and what is possible because of your relationship are two different things.

Call us at 403.863.9700 for more guidance and ideas on goal setting.



Our parenting goals are:

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper designed for writing. It features a series of evenly spaced horizontal blue lines across its entire width. A single vertical red line runs down the left side of the page, creating a narrow margin. The paper is otherwise completely empty, with no text or other markings.

Living arrangements

Children thrive on the kind of dependable order that only we as parents can provide them. Getting the basic arrangements in place quickly is an important step that parents can take to minimise the long-term impact on children and help the process of healthy recovery.

There are many different contact patterns you can choose for your family. You should agree on a pattern that works for your children at the age they are now and be prepared to change to a different pattern as they get older.

Ask for the children's feedback but be clear you are the adults and you will make the final decision. Beware of asking them too much, what they want – they potentially don't know, or it will not be possible...then your asking will seem insincere to them.

As a guide

- Make sure there are duplicate sets of clothes/shoes in each home and that you and the other parent have an agreement to take equal responsibility for laundry. Don't send dirty clothes back to the other parent!
- Share the responsibility for knowing the children's homework schedule and ensuring that homework deadlines are met.
- Both maintain an informed overview of your children's developing social lives so these are accommodated as seamlessly as possible between both homes.
- Try to each ensure that when the children are with you, life is a mixture of ordinary daily routine and fun down-time, so that neither experience becomes polarised between the two homes.
- Remember, when it's your time with the children you are responsible for their care. Don't expect the other parent to accommodate you automatically if your plans need to change.

Your children are your first and last priority – work and other arrangements come second.



Living arrangements

Living arrangements: questions & considerations

Some of the questions and considerations won't be relevant.

- How will we share the care?
E.g. shared care with 50/50 time split
- What pattern of days works best?
E.g. week on / week off
- Will our work allow for any new arrangements we are considering?
- Where will we and the kids live?
E.g. we both live in separate houses near to their school
- If neither of us can look after the children, who are we agreed can look after them?
E.g. family members, friends, babysitters etc
- How will pick ups and drop offs work?
- Are there times where contacting the kids is inconvenient when with the other parent?

Our living arrangement goals are:

We've already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Holidays

Holidays

School holidays

If your kids are in public school there are 13 weeks of holiday you will need to cover between you (more if they are privately educated). If you both work, this can be tricky as not many people get six and a half weeks holiday!

You will need to think about how you will pay for holiday, camp or additional childcare and how you will cope with the shortened hours they often provide. The difference between parenting and co-parenting is that now, you are each expected to take responsibility for organising childcare for half the holidays (or at the very least when you have parenting time), it shouldn't just fall to one parent (as it may have done in the past). If one of you has a part-time contract, works fewer hours or doesn't work, you may decide it makes sense for that parent to take more responsibility for the children during the holidays. If this is the case, you may consider it appropriate for the other parent to make additional financial contributions over the longer holiday periods.

Vacations (trips away from home)

There are some legal things to understand about holidays...

- If you have joint custody you will need the consent of anyone else with parental custody, unless you are named as the parent with sole custody.
- If you travel abroad with your children, you may need a notarised signed letter giving you permission to travel from the other parent. Check what is required on the government website or call the Foreign Office to check a specific country's requirement.

Think about how you will spend time away from the normal routine with your children. This doesn't mean expensive foreign holidays. It may be a staycation or a series of days out - but spending time out of the normal routine is good for children and parents. It also gives each parent some respite time. Try not to compete with each other on holidays. It might be one of you has more money or friends with luxurious places you can borrow – but children love spending time with you – they remember the fun not the level of luxury.

If you find the whole idea of taking your kids away on your own (especially tough if they are very young), you might want to think about going with friends or family members for the first couple of times. There are also a growing number of holiday companies who specialise in single parent holidays across a wide range of budgets.

Holidays:
questions & considerations

- How much holiday (away from home) do you propose to each have with the children?
- How will you negotiate when the holidays will be?
- For babies and very young children – are holidays without the primary carer a realistic prospect?
- Where will the children’s passports be kept?

Our holiday goals are:

We’ve already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Special occasions



Special occasions

Festivals/Celebrations

There are some holidays such as Christmas that can be very emotive, when you both want to be with your children. There are lots of options for dividing these special occasions depending on your circumstances, how close you live, how well you get along, the age of your kids. Remember – kids do not want to spend their day in the car travelling between you just so you can each say you've had half the time.

If your children are old enough to tell you how they want to spend their day, then listen to them and include their ideas, even if it feels unfair to you. If your kids are younger, then consider splitting the time either on the day (if you live down the road from each other) or over the Christmas period (if you live further apart). If you are splitting the period then do it in chunks and agree to swap over the following year. Sometimes kids can put pressure on you to spend the day as a family. If you feel this is achievable, then by all means do it. For many parents though, this just isn't a good idea. Tension on Christmas is not good, especially for the kids. So be realistic – if spending the day or even a short time together will cause tension then don't go there. Your kids will manage more easily with seeing you happy separately than together with an atmosphere.

Special occasions

You may have a parenting routine that works for both of you and then along comes Mother's day or Dad's birthday and a whole series of negotiations are required. Increasingly new partners have weekends when they do and don't have their children and it can all become very complicated. Try and be flexible where you can. Let the kids be with their Dad/Mom on mother's/ father's day if you can and if the other parent's family always get together for a certain birthday or occasion then try and support your children's relationship with their extended family by accommodating special occasions.



Special occasions:
questions & considerations

- What arrangements are in place for holidays like Christmas?
- How will you share birthdays?
- What will you do on Mother’s / Father’s days?

Our goals for special occasions are:

We’ve already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Health

Depending on your shared parenting arrangements, it might make sense for one or other parent to take the lead on routine health matters. Remember however, that the other parent will always want to know about emergencies and non-routine health issues.

If time is shared equally between parents, then communication about routine health will need more consideration as both will have responsibility for this aspect of care.

Your child's health and wellbeing will always be important to both of you. You will need to consider not only your child's physical health but also their mental health. This can sometimes cause problems because parents are often less well informed about how to access support and what/whether support is needed.

When you and your partner separate, your child may struggle emotionally. This doesn't necessarily mean they need specialist support. In the first instance try talking to them. It's sometimes a good idea to try and do this casually when you're doing a task together or when you are in the car and there is less pressure to look directly at each other. It might take a while for your child to open up so be patient. If you have more than one child try and set some time aside for one to one time. This can be facilitated by separate bedtimes or getting up early with one of them. It doesn't have to be a long time, 20 minutes is fine, but creating some special time together you are more likely to get them to talk about their feelings. You'll need to consider how you communicate with your co-parent without breaking confidences and explain when something must be shared with their other parent.

If your child is struggling to cope emotionally over a more prolonged period of time, then getting some help is essential. Go to your family doctor to ask for a referral or search for specialist child therapists in your area. Don't forget to keep your co-parent in the loop.

Health



Health:
questions & considerations

- How would you like responsibility to be shared for your children’s routine health needs, such as dentist or optometrist appointments, or vaccinations?
- How will you share information and make decisions regarding your children’s health and well-being? This might include the need for you both to be aware of medication schedules (taking of prescription drugs, use of inhalers, etc. allergies, hospital appointment times, special diets, chronic conditions, emergencies.
- How will you make important decisions about your child/ren’s healthcare? How will you resolve any differences quickly?



Our health goals are:

We’ve already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Education

Education

School is a major part of your children's lives and a central pillar providing structure and social support, as well as academic opportunity.

When you and their other parent separate, school may become particularly essential as a source of continuity and stability for your children. Your children may wish to keep your separation a secret from school, but it's actually very important that the administration and teachers know what's going on so they can keep an eye on your children's welfare and spot any worrying changes in their behaviour or performance. Because school is such a major part of your children's lives, it's vital that you both show a keen and curious interest in what they do there and how they feel about it. Avoid only one parent "dealing" with the school.

The legal bit

All parents with custody are entitled to make decisions about their child's education and receive information from the school even if, for day-to-day purposes, the school's main contact is with the parent whom the children live with on school days.

Anyone with custody has the right to:

- receive information – such as report cards
- participate in school activities – school concerts and events
- be asked to give consent - such as to the child taking part in school trips (typically only the person with parenting time at that time of the field trip needs to give consent, unless it is with international travel)
- be informed about meetings involving the child

As parents you should agree moving to a different school together. If agreement cannot be reached then Fresh Start offers negotiation sessions to help resolve specific issues. A school can refuse a place to a child if there is a dispute between parents and wait until the dispute has been settled by the court.



Education: questions & considerations

- How do you propose communicating your separation to teachers (and any parents) at school?
- Have you arranged for duplicate information to be sent to each of you – does the school have all your up to date contact information?
- How will you organise attendance at school functions, such as; parent’s night, school plays, sports day, etc?
- If options arise over which schools your children might attend, how would you hope to arrive at an agreed choice of school with the other parent?
- Who will pay for school activities or school meals?

Our education goals are:

We’ve already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Child support

Child support is the money a parent pays towards their child's upbringing. All parents have a responsibility to support their child financially (even if they don't see them). Child support is usually a regular monthly payment to the parent who cares for the child most/more of the time. Child support is the amount payable and is calculated taking into account how much your child's other parent earns, how often the child stays over with them, whether they have other children, or children living with them.

You can pay more than the minimum amount to take into account your child's lifestyle or to include paying bills (such as the mortgage on the family home) or buying items such as clothes and toys, this expense is referred to as Section 7 expenses.

There are different ways to arrange child support and it's up to you to choose the one that best suits your circumstances. Most people do a private arrangement between themselves setting up a regular direct debit payment, but if you think things will be tricky, you can ask the [Maintenance Enforcement Program](#) to help. They have a range of options depending on how much agreement there is between you. To help you agree an amount, work out what your current children expenses are by making a list of what you spend each month.

Use the government's [child support calculator](#) for guidance

Child maintenance



Child maintenance: questions & considerations

- Section 7 expenses– how much, how will it be funded, how often and who gives it?
- How will you fund clubs, hobbies, swimming or music lessons/ instruments and school trips?
- How do you propose to fund big birthday/Christmas presents such as bikes and phones/laptops?
- Who will pay for driving lessons?
- What arrangements will be in place for paying for professional training, Further or Higher Education?



Our child maintenance goals are:

We’ve already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Parental responsibility, values, beliefs & behaviours

Parental responsibility, values, beliefs and behaviours

Day-to-day parenting decisions will be made by the person looking after their child at that time; they don't necessarily have to be agreed with the other parent. This doesn't mean parents shouldn't discuss what they think is appropriate on a day-to-day level. It is helpful if as parents you can agree on how to tackle issues such as discipline, bedtimes, and homework, but if you don't agree on these things then neither of you can force the issue with the other.

As a parent however, there are some things you do have to agree on. These are things that you are entitled to decide if you have parental responsibility for your child. Parental responsibility means the legal rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority a parent has for a child and the child's property. A person who has parental responsibility for a child has the right to make decisions about their care and upbringing. Important decisions in a child's life must be agreed with anyone else who has parental responsibility. Here are some examples of important decisions in a child's life that should have the agreement of everyone with parental responsibility:

- Where a child lives.
- Whether or not a child has medical treatment.
- How and where a child is educated.
- Which, if any, religion a child follows.
- Deciding a child's name and registering their birth.
- Giving consent for a child to leave the country, whether for a holiday or permanently.

Either parent can decide who a child sees when they are with them. If you or your child's other parent wants to introduce a new partner to your child, ideally you should discuss how it might affect your child and how they feel. You cannot prevent your child's other parent introducing a new partner to your child, unless the new partner would pose a risk to your child.

Of course you both want your children to behave well and to grow-up responsibly. However, at the point where your marriage is breaking down, you may not have a very high opinion of the other parent's values or morals or trust them to be a responsible parent. This can make it hard to set common boundaries for the two homes while leaving enough difference to reflect your own individual parenting style.

The balance is tricky. A common problem is micro-managing the other parent in terms of what the children can and can't do when they spend time with them. Resist this, however difficult, if you can. The children's two homes will be different in the same way children's friend's houses are different. Children cope with different rules in different houses provided they know you are in charge.



Values, beliefs & behaviours; questions & considerations

- How will you ensure that your children are not getting mixed messages from you and the other parent about what is expected of their behaviour?
- Are there some common house rules that apply to both homes – what are they?
- Do you have an agreed approach to discipline? (common consequences, upholding the consequences, whether it's acceptable for consequences to spill over into the other parent's time (e.g. ban on phone or iPad time)?
- How do you think you and the other parent might best support each other to ensure these rules are applied and adhered to in both homes?
- If your children belong to a particular faith, or practise within a particular cultural tradition, how do you propose these should be maintained and upheld in both homes?

Our values, beliefs & behaviours goals are:

We've already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:



Communication

Couple-parenting is completely different to co-parenting. Nobody tells you this when you separate or divorce, and yet you're often making huge decisions in new uncharted waters and without the proverbial paddle – it's scary stuff. Putting children first as you separate requires different parenting skills.

Tips on effective co-parenting

- 1. Put on your own oxygen mask before attempting to help others – sort out you:** You can't put your kids first no matter how much you want to without making sure you are in a good place – it's just impossible. The key thing is to recognise that to seek help is an efficient and speedy way of making sure you have all the strategies and tools to hand to start this new part of the journey. Find a therapist, preferably one who is a divorce specialist, and be the best you can be quickly. You will be very glad you invested this time.
- 2. Define your new co-parenting relationship – don't attempt to pick-up where you left off:** Your relationship as partners has ended but your parenting relationship continues. However, it continues a different footing. Old familiarities are no longer appropriate and it's time to redefine the boundaries. You're aiming for polite, calm, respectful and neutral. Make proposals not demands and start conversations positively by asking for your co-parents' opinions.
- 3. Complete control is not an option – don't sweat the small stuff:** You may feel frustrated that your ex does things differently to you or even feel the children are upset by the differences. Avoid spending time and energy on trying to control a situation or what your ex does. Instead, find a time and place to discuss how you both want to parent and look for similarities and agree on some basic house rules first e.g. bedtimes, homework routine and discipline.
- 4. Be flexible. Plan for change and manage it well:** Whether you have informal arrangements to meet the needs of your children, or a documented parenting plan, you will need to regularly revisit your arrangements as the children grow. Plan regular time, for example, every six months to a year to discuss arrangements and check all the children's needs are being recognised. Be prepared to talk to your children about how they are finding things and take time with your co-parent to consider the children's feedback.
- 5. Let the tech take the strain – invest in a tool to support your new family set up** Reducing the burden on each other to remember messages or create emails from scratch minimizes the opportunity for miscommunication and ultimately helps to reduce conflict.
- 6. Talk to your children:** Tell them what's happening and understand how they're feeling. Keep things simple and age appropriate. Avoid blaming either parent (that includes self-blame), be truthful about situations but not explicit in the details you give – your private life remains your private life. Most importantly of all learn to listen to your children. Create time and space to give them your full attention and just listen. Don't interrupt or ask too many questions, and don't try and solve or minimize their concerns.



Communication



Communication; questions & considerations

- What steps will you take to avoid bad-mouthing or criticising your co-parent in front of the children?
- How will you make amends when your humanness means you slip up?
- How will you manage any conflicted communication between the two of you so that the children don't have to hear it?
- What's the best way to communicate with the other parent to minimise conflict (telephone, text, app, email, etc.)?
- How will you remember that once divorced the only topic you need to get involved in with your ex is the children?
- How will you make it ok for the children to talk freely about time spent with the other parent? What help and support might you need if this is tough?
- It's important to let the children know you communicate with the other parent about them. This will stop them playing you off against each other and show a united front. How will you achieve this? You might find it helpful to agree some "stock phrase" you will both use. e.g. "I'll need to check it with Mom because it might be inconvenient for her; Sorry, but Dad and I both agree that you're still too young to have an instagram account".
- What sort of communication will you hope to maintain with members of the extended family in relation to the children?
- How will you both introduce new partners?
- How do you propose to update, change or re-negotiate aspects of the Parenting Plan as the family moves forward? How will you record any changes?



Our communication goals are:

We've already agreed that...

We still need to agree on:

Get in touch



Complete the Parenting
After Separation course



Book you're an initial
No-charge consult
With Fresh Start
don@freshstartmediation.ca



Call [\(403\) 863-9700](tel:4038639700) on
advice to get started