

PARENTING PLANS

The parenting planning is an agreement between parents of a child who are no longer in a relationship on common issues which affect the child

When parties who have children separate, there is a fall out from the separation. Maintenance, care arrangements, schooling issues and matters which affect the welfare of the children must be dealt with.

There is a growing belief that litigation – the court system – is not the best way to resolve disputes on these issues and most of the time people prefer to avoid court.

A parenting plan allows parties to come to a mutual agreement on these so that both parents and the extended family can avoid conflict when issues arise and the children can benefit from consistency in how both parents parent them.

HOW DO PARENTING PLANS WORK WHEN PARENTS ARE SEPARATING – WHO IS INVOLVED IN PUTTING TOGETHER THESE PARENTING PLANS?

Parenting Plans are similar to mediation type scenario - it is an agreement between the parties and is based on both sides coming together in good faith with a willingness to abide by the terms agreed for the benefit of the whole family.

Your solicitor will be able to help you in putting together the plan. They will be able to highlight the areas that you will need to consider or that you may not even think of such as future arrangements and I find often people are more comfortable negotiating through someone who is removed from the family situation.

They will guide you as to what is reasonable in any proposals that are made and will advise you on the options available to you.

Your solicitor will also provide you with the support you need during the negotiation process.

YOU MENTIONED COUPLES HAVE TO COME TO THE PROCESS BEING WILLING TO COMMUNICATE –CAN YOU GIVE ANY POINTERS THAT MIGHT HELP SEPARATING COUPLES?

- Think about when, where and how often you are going to discuss things.
- Respect each other's views.
- Support each other as parents in, for example, discipline or the children's education.
- Think about your continuing responsibilities as parents, rather than the difficulties of your past relationship.
- Try not to row or criticise each other in front of your children.
- Remember that we all make mistakes, and just because one particular topic provokes a row, it does not mean that you should give up talking altogether.
- Make time to talk to each child separately, as well as together.
- Show your children that you support each other as parents, even though you can no longer live together.
- Use words and ways of talking that don't show blame.
- Explain your plans clearly and what effects these will have, and listen carefully to your children's views.
- Reassure your children wherever possible.
- Remember that each child is different, and will react in their own way to your separation or divorce.

ONE OF THE AIMS IT SEEMS IS THAT THERE WOULD BE A CONFLICT FREE ZONE FOR CHILDREN – IS THIS HARD TO ACHIEVE?

If children are to succeed after separation, they must be protected from parental conflict and allowed to enjoy close relationships with both parents. Despite pain, resentment, and disagreements, it is possible for separated parents to surround their children with a “conflict-free” zone.

To create a conflict free zone, parents must learn to control and restrain themselves. They must have the consideration to refrain from arguing and fighting when their children are present. They should save discussion of volatile issues for a time when their child is not around. Because most children are attached to both parents, each untimed remark is like a physical blow.

Shift gears from being marriage partners to being parent partners.

I recommend:

1. Settle disagreements through give and take and compromise, and respect individual differences.
2. Treat the other parent with respect, and avoid making derogatory statements about the other parent in the presence of your child.
3. Avoid arguments, scenes, threats, fights, and violence, especially when your children are present
4. Do not be overly critical of or try to control the other parent.
5. Avoid pressuring the other parent about getting back together, and respect the other parent’s privacy.
6. Do not sacrifice your child over money.
7. Make child support payments on time.

8. Gain the other parent's trust by keeping your agreements and promises.
9. Accept the facts that the other parent has the right to spend time with the children, and that your children have the right to a relationship with the other parent.

WHAT ABOUT VISITATION ARRANGEMENTS AS AN ISSUE? THIS MUST CAUSE DIFFICULTY A LOT OF THE TIME - ARE THERE ANY GUIDELINES HERE FOR COUPLES WHO HAVE SEPARATED?

- There is no right set of arrangements that will suit everyone.
- Access arrangements should be discussed with your children and their needs and wishes taken into account.
- Access visits are meant to be enjoyable, but they can be stressful at first, for all concerned. It is worth persevering with, because they can benefit you all.
- It is helpful for children to have a regular pattern of contact visits which should be established as soon after separation as possible.
- The best pattern of visits will vary with the age of the child. Shorter, more frequent visits may work better for younger children.
- If visits are very short, or very infrequent, it may be difficult for a parent and child to feel relaxed together.
- Overnight stays, where possible, are important in allowing the parent and child to experience ordinary daily routines together.
- Failure by either parent to stick to the arrangements for contact may be distressing for a child and make them feel less secure.
- Because emotions are often raw following a separation, it may be difficult for parents to agree on contact arrangements. If there is no

practical alternative a neutral contact point/party may be used temporarily.

- If a child does not want to go on a contact visit it is important to try to understand why and to discuss this with those involved.
- Cooperate when there is an emergency or crisis
- Seek help for your child if red flag symptoms persist
- Discussing changes in your family situation can benefit you and your children. It can help avoid misunderstandings and friction between you as parents. It will show your children that they continue to be important to you. Clear communication will also help make the changes run as smoothly as possible.

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