

PARENTING PLAN GUIDANCE



Social Services
Department

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Introduction

Aim of this booklet

The aim of this booklet is to help separated families reach agreement about the continuing care and support of the children of the family and address practical issues such as;

- Communicating with each other and the children;
- Living arrangements;
- Health care and emotional wellbeing;
- Holidays;
- Financial support;
- Education.

It is designed to help you focus on the individual needs of children after the separation of families and continue to meet their needs as you move forward with your lives. This booklet is not designed to assist adults through separation of assets etc, but to assist and support in co-parenting and providing certainty for children.

What is a Parenting Plan?

A parenting plan is an agreement between separated parents which focuses their attention on the children and how best they can continue to co-parent to meet the needs of their children.

Keeping Safe

Although it's best for separated parents to develop a co-operative parenting approach, this may not always be the safest way forward for the children.

If there has been:

- Domestic abuse;
- Child neglect or abandonment;
- Sexual, physical or emotional abuse of a child; or
- Substance misuse issues

serious consideration should be given to the following:

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

- The abuse of drugs or alcohol or other substance misuse?
- Any form of child abuse?
- Child abduction?
- Any form of domestic abuse?
- Any other welfare or safety concerns?

After you've considered this, if you have answered yes to any of them you should seek further assistance from the social services team.

Communication Tips

To be able to make an effective plan parents need to be able communicate effectively with each other.

These tips may help make communication more effective:

- Stay calm – deep breathing and relaxing your shoulders may help with this.
- Listen to each – take turns to speak and focus on what is being said. It's often helpful to allow pauses to avoid speaking over each other.
- Be clear and consistent – keep requests clear and simple, don't try and deal with lots of issues at the same time and be courteous to each other.
- Deadlock – if you reach a deadlock it may be that taking time apart to consider different views will help you agree on a decision together.

Listening to your child after separation

The below is taken from the CAFCASS parenting plan.

Separation is usually emotionally difficult for parents and for children, but being able to listen really well to your child might be the key to helping them – and you. However hard you try, it is very likely that your child will pick up your anxious, distressed or negative feelings. These feelings can get in the way of listening, but only by listening well and openly to them can you find out what is actually worrying your child. But when your own feelings could be a mixture of anger, sadness and worry, it is not so easy to set those feelings to one side and really listen to your child. Their feelings could be different to yours, and how you respond can significantly affect their wellbeing. What can help you is to develop your emotional ‘readiness’ – to really listen and respond. This means acknowledging your own feelings, and any negative thoughts about the other parent, and then being able to set them aside so that you can really listen to your child. Then you can understand them better and respond in the ways that most help.

Step 1

It’s very common to feel a range of negative feelings during a separation, for example, worry, anger, sadness, fear or powerlessness. Sometimes these can seem overwhelming. Feelings don’t go away if you pretend they are not there – sometimes that can lead to them coming out in unpredictable ways. In step 1 you identify some of those feelings for yourself, accepting that they can be distressing and also seeing that they are normal feelings in the early stages of a separation. You may find it helps to write them down. These are the feelings that you will need to keep in check while listening to your child. Putting a label on how you feel can help you feel in control.

Step 2

This step is about communication skills...Staying calm will help you to keep your feelings in check...These can help you to put your feelings to one side and start to focus on listening to your child. You might find it helpful to repeat the exercises several times. Learning to listen is a really important skill, ... you can practise listening with your child, whatever they are telling you, and you can do this with some of their day-to-day worries or triumphs before talking about the bigger things. Seeing things differently is about seeing your child’s perspective and keeping your own feelings about the other parent separate. A really helpful tip when listening to your child is not to jump in too quickly with your own theories or solutions – leave a little space and try to see your child’s point of view.

Step 3

This is about reassuring your child – they might feel powerless about what is happening. However, reassurance works only when it is:

- *possible – you can only reassure your child about what you know you can deliver on;*
- *a real example of how things will be and how they will work – make it real and concrete; and*
- *honest and ongoing. If there are some things you are not yet sure you can deliver, the best way to help your child is to say ‘We don’t yet know, but we will be working on that’, and keep them updated on when you can give them at least some information.*

When reassuring your child, look at the areas where things will not change. This may be the relationship with both parents, or school, friends or routines. Spell out what any changes might be and how you will help them through these. Try to agree and stick to a plan for contact with the other parent and with grandparents or other important people in their lives. Depending on their age and ability to understand, involve your child in expressing their view about what any changes will look like. Make sure that you do what you have said will happen.

SOME TIPS THAT MAY HELP:

- *Help your child to put a name to a feeling. Sometimes putting a name to it can make an overwhelming feeling seem more under control.*
- *Look at your child’s body language and behaviour – this might help you to offer a good guess about how they might be feeling. You can suggest a possible feeling, without any judgement, and help your child to put a name to how they feel. This helps to make it OK to talk about how they are feeling – you have the words and a safe place to talk about them.*
- *Once you have labelled a feeling together, reassure them that it is a normal feeling in the circumstances.*
- *To spot a child’s difficulty in expressing distressing feelings, look for changes in their behaviour, trouble at school, falling out with friends, or being unusually quiet.*
- *Look out for your child ending conversations about separation or the other parent too early – this might mean that there is more that your child needs to talk about.*
- *If you need some help with how your child is feeling, talk to your GP, school counsellor, school nurse or other health worker.*

How do we make a Parenting Plan?

When going through this section of the guidance, it may be useful to have the parenting plan template to hand for reference.

Principles for your plan

- Keep it realistic – don’t agree to something that you know cannot work.
- Think of the needs of your child – what do they need from each of you.

- Ask your child what they think.
- Keep it simple or put in as much details as possible – the plan is for you and your child; it needs to be clear and understood by you.

Questions to ask yourselves

When completing your parenting plan, the following questions may help in reaching decisions and thinking about situations that may arise and how you would like to approach them together.

Communication

- ❖ What decisions do we need to consult each other about?
- ❖ What decisions do we not need to consult each other about?
- ❖ How are we going to share important information about the children between us?
- ❖ Do we need to agree how to behave towards each other in front of the children? We want them to see us getting along together.
- ❖ Would face to face meetings help us communicate about the children better?
- ❖ Should we have arranged monthly meetings about the children and parenting?
- ❖ How do we ask the children about what they want to happen?
- ❖ Do we need to discuss how we talk about each other in front the of children?
- ❖ What shall we do in emergencies (medical, accident etc)?
- ❖ How are we going to keep the children in contact with extended family?
- ❖ Do we need to discuss how to approach routines and family rules (for example, bed times, access to internet and electronic devices, curfews, homework)?
- ❖ How do we introduce new partners to the children?
- ❖ How are we going to tell the children about what we agree in the parenting plan?
- ❖ Are there any apps or messaging platforms that will help us communicate together?

Childcare & Living Arrangements

- ❖ Where will the children live?
- ❖ How many days of the week will they spend there?
- ❖ Where will the children go to nursery/child care?
- ❖ How will we manage school drop-off and pick up?
- ❖ How will be agree who takes them to any clubs/activities?
- ❖ Who will be alternative carers if we are not available?
- ❖ Are there any days when they can spend time with us together?
- ❖ How do we manage special occasions? (birthdays, Christmas, family events)
- ❖ What do we do about clothing, toys, books, school work between the households?
- ❖ How will we manage school holidays?
- ❖ How will manage planned holidays and keep contact with the other parent?
- ❖ What do we do if one of us has an emergency (medical or working late) and can't care for the children as agreed?
- ❖ How do we ensure they are spending time with extended family?
- ❖ How will we manage ordering clothes/shoes any other items the children need?
- ❖ Have we made a travel agreement to ensure the other parent can travel overseas with the children in emergency (if needed)?

- ❖ Who will be responsible for the Children's passports and official documents? (birth certificate, medical records etc).

Financial Agreements

- ❖ How will day to day costs for the children be shared (clothes, nappies, school trips, computers etc)?
- ❖ What do we agree about any other financial commitments (e.g. boarding school, nursery bills, clubs and activities)
- ❖ What do we agree about the children having pocket money?
- ❖ How will we communicate and review the financial agreements if circumstances change?
- ❖ How are we going to plan for the children's future? (for example, costs for further or higher education).
- ❖ Who is responsible for financial benefits for the children (for example, holiday credit scheme or family allowance) and how is that managed?
- ❖ How do we manage any bank accounts in the name of the children?

Education & Health

- ❖ How do we make decisions about the children's schooling (i.e. selection of school) and how do we discuss this with the children?
- ❖ How do we want the school to communicate with us? Do we want meetings together or separately?
- ❖ How do we support our children through education and homework? Do we separate out subject areas we can help with or help with whatever they bring home with them?
- ❖ How do we communicate with the school about our family arrangements so the children can be given support if they need it?
- ❖ How do we share responsibility for schooling resources (i.e. folders, materials etc)?
- ❖ What do we do if the children need medical treatment overseas?
- ❖ How will we discuss any medical treatment or requirements? Is there anything we agree can be done without consultation with the other parent?

Other Matters

Every family is different and every child is unique – this is a space for you to consider anything that is unique to you that you might need to make a decision about. For example:

- ❖ Do your children have special needs that need to be considered and arrangements made to ensure their needs are being met?
- ❖ Are there any religious matters that you may need to reach agreement about?

Your completed plan

Once you've completed your plan make sure you've all got a copy of it.

Keeping up to date

Some families are happy to review as and when needed, others find it easier to have a set date to review how well the plan is working.