

# PARENTING PLAN DISCUSSION GUIDE



WHOLE FAMILY LAW  
& Mediation

This Parenting Plan Discussion Guide was designed for clients of Whole Family Law and Mediation. It was created to help facilitate clients' understanding about the various considerations that must be made when determining the most appropriate post-separation and post-divorce parenting plan, and help facilitate the "offline" or at-home homework and discussions between spouses about the terms of their separation agreement. This resource is considered an attorney-client work product and is privileged communication. It is not to be reproduced or distributed in any form

# **PARENTING PLAN WORKBOOK**

## **Child Custody**

### **Questions each parent should ask themselves and consider before and while negotiating custody and a parenting schedule:**

- How do you want your child to remember this time in their lives, and to think about their family? What are you going to do, in making decisions about custody and parenting time, to ensure those memories?
- Are you in agreement with your spouse (or able to reasonably come to agreement) about important aspects of your child(ren)'s life, including religion, education, travel and medical care? What do you need to do to come to agreement on these issues?
- Is one of you in a better position, because of work, location, skills or schedule, or your child's needs, better able to care for your child(ren) during particular times of the week, or do you have more room in your house for your children?
- What is your child(ren)'s schedule during the week – how might this influence how you divide your time with the child?
- What is your child(ren)'s relationship with each of you now? In what ways do you want that to stay the same? In what ways do you want that to change?
- Who has been primarily taking care of your child(ren) up until the separation? This does not dictate what happens in the future (as each spouse will be taking on new parenting roles), but can be helpful information.
- What are each of your strengths as parents?
- Does your child or any of your children have particular needs that might indicate a particular parenting schedule?
- What do you imagine your child(ren) might want?
- Are each of you prepared to consider your child(ren)'s needs before your own, and protect your child(ren) from conflict between you and your spouse?

**MOST IMPORTANTLY:** remember that your child experiences themselves as half of each of you and their other parent. You and your spouse may not wish to stay married, but you will always be a family.

## **HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK:**

1. Begin by visiting [www.uptoparents.com](http://www.uptoparents.com) to create a joint mission statement about your parenting relationship. Your statement should be a philosophical statement, referencing the fact that you will be parents and a family of sorts until your /experience with you as parents.
2. Set goals for your parenting arrangements – such as “Our goal is that our children will experience a minimum amount of disruption in their lives” or “Our goal is to maximize the time that each of us spends with our children and they with us” or “Our goal is to facilitate a fully equal co-parenting relationship.” Etc.
3. Do a self-assessment of your own parenting strengths and challenges, your own needs, and an assessment of what you think is in your child(ren)’s best interests; write this down.
4. Meet with your spouse/former partner/co-parent at a place where you can have uninterrupted conversation, not in front of your child(ren).
5. Keep in mind that statements such as ‘you always,’ ‘you never’ or characterizations about the other person will almost always be experienced by the other person as attacks, and the other person will likely respond with a counter-attack or a defense. If you want to have a cooperative discussion, use “I” statements, ask questions to better understand why things are important to the other parent, and remember that you might have different ideas about parenting, and that this can be ok (as long as the child is safe).
6. Focus on interests, rather than positions, and ask a lot of questions. Don’t just say, “I want our child for ½ of the time” – say “It is really important to me to play a meaningful role in our child’s life and upbringing. I don’t know how to do that without equal time, but perhaps you have ideas?”
7. Remember that the other parent is a person, and may be dealing with loss, grieving, anger – the whole gamut of emotions. Try to empathize with them, and offer acknowledgments: “I really can appreciate that you’ve made sacrifices...”
8. When things get particularly difficult, “go to the balcony” – take a third person’s perspective – perhaps your child’s, perhaps a friend’s. Imagine what you would be thinking if you were watching the difficult conversation from a balcony position.
9. Review the accompanying worksheets from Minnesota and UpToParents to get other an idea of questions to ask.
10. Work through each issue; if you come to an issue where you get stuck, “park” it in the parking lot to be discussed later. If things get heated, take some time for a break.

## **PARENTING ISSUES TO DISCUSS:**

- 1) How will you share Legal Custody? (some of the questions below flesh this out)?
- 2) How will you share Physical (residential) custody?
- 3) Parenting time – residence, schedule
  - a. Regular week
  - b. Special holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Birthdays, etc.)
  - c. Routine holidays or Monday holidays? (4<sup>th</sup> of July, Labor Day, etc.)  
(note – with holidays, parents often share holidays the way that they shared holidays while married – reflecting each parents’ extended family practices. Others split the holidays equally, or alternate years. Children will benefit from regularity and predictability).
  - d. School vacations
  - e. Summer vacations – how much time will each parent get with the child(ren)? How will you determine the schedule? (for instance, sometimes parents agree to discuss summer plans in February or April, and in even years the one person’s scheduling preferences has priority, and on the odd years the other parent’s scheduling preferences have priority)
- 4) Pickups & Drop Offs – where will they be, who will do the transporting?
- 5) Schedule changes – do all schedule changes need to be made in a certain period of time prior to visit?
- 6) How will you to communicate information about your children’s lives while they live between houses (e.g. – sometimes families will use a journal, an online scheduler, etc.)
- 7) How will you make decisions about your child’s health and healthcare? How will you make decisions about your child(ren)’s medical provider?
- 8) How will you make decisions about your child’s mental health? (for instance, if one parent thinks the child needs special education or needs to see a psychotherapist or psychiatrist?)
- 9) Education – how will you make decisions about daycare, preschool, kindergarten, grade school, high school, college? Do you need to make any decisions in the near future?
- 10) Will you share decisions regarding the child(ren)’s daily educational needs, including parent-teacher conferences, homework, other school events?
- 11) How will you make decisions about extra-curricular activities – including in what

activities the children will enroll and who will pay for the activities?

- 12) Who will make other important decisions – whether a child can go out to a certain house, get a cell phone, get a drivers' license, etc?
- 13) How do you anticipate sharing your child's college education costs, should they matriculate in college?
- 14) How will you resolve disputes later on? [such as utilizing a family mediator or therapist?]
- 15) How far in advance do you want the other parent to provide information to you if they want to go out of state?
- 16) What would you each like to do when/if one of you becomes involved with a new boyfriend/girlfriend?
- 17) Who do you each want to be contacted in the event of an emergency? Can this be the same person? Who would you want to take care of your children in the event of an emergency and the other parent can't be reached? Can this be the same person?
- 18) How are you going to share other costs (in child support section of the agreement, but still relevant during this discussion).
- 19) Who will make decisions about the child(ren)'s religion? About their diet/health/outdoor play?
- 20) What kind of a commitment do you want to make to reside close to each other? How will you make decisions about what will happen if one parent wants to move to a different area of the state? What about out of state?
- 21) What do each of you believe about discipline? If you have different ideas about discipline, how will you work to achieve consistency between the two households?
- 22) How often will you agree to sit down to review your agreements and modify, based on changes to your schedules or your children's needs?