

Creating a Coparenting Plan

You and your coparent can create a coparenting plan. Often what I see in my work with families is that families do not plan ahead. They wait until something is not working to address the problem. Or, they proceed on assumptions, which may result in more conflict and lead to more litigation.

A plan helps provide a roadmap for others. For example, a stepmother would likely not cut her stepdaughter's hair to her ears when it's been at her waist if the parents have an agreement that states, "The parents must mutually agree to significant changes in the child's physical or cosmetic appearance."

A good parenting plan:

- Is a written plan.
- Provides future solutions to help parents avoid pitfalls.
- Promotes trust.
- Promotes continuity and stability.
- Helps stepparents and other family members by providing a road map.

A coparenting plan is a contract agreed to by you and your coparent that establishes guidelines both homes will follow.

Bear in mind that people change. Rules change, living situations change, and people move on to new relationships. A coparenting plan addresses many of these pitfalls and helps keep you out of court and out of conflict with the other parent. Because dividing time between adults requires a great deal of trust between the coparents, a coparenting plan in a large way promotes this security because you have agreed on certain guidelines. The age of the child, of course, has a great bearing on how detailed you need to be in terms of your plan. Young children *need* consistency between homes. Older children are more adaptable, but may require more rules.

Coparenting plans help future relationships because the plan allows the significant others in your present or future to read what you agreed on and decide whether they can honor that agreement. If not, they are not likely the right choice to be a stepparent. Additionally, you will be less prone to follow a different path when you have a plan of action.

It would be very difficult for someone else to create the best parenting plan for each of you and your child. Coparenting plans are created to document the ongoing coparenting and family rules that do not and should not end just because an intimate relationship has ended or because there is conflict between the coparents. Even the "experts" don't always agree on very important issues that are fundamental to coparenting. For example, what type of discipline is best, should the child sleep with you or not, and so on.

When creating a parenting plan, a good question to ask yourself is, "How would we have handled this if we both lived together?" Generally, if the answer now differs because there are two homes, ask yourself, "Why is it better for our child to do this differently?" and "Is it possible to handle the situation the same way we would have if we lived together?" For example, examine such questions as:

- Who do I ask to watch our child if I can't be with the child during my parenting time? Generally, if you still lived together, you'd ask your coparent first before you asked family, friends, a nanny, or a babysitter.
- Would I let our child spend time with friends if I were seeing him or her every day? Generally, yes, you would. In fact, you'd probably be saying, "Go out and play."
- Where would our child sleep if we still lived together? The way you did it before should be continued unless both parents mutually agree otherwise.



You know your child better than anyone else, and both parents know what direction they want to raise the child in. A coparenting plan should cover at least some of the following areas and provide answers to the following questions:

- **Bed Time and Routines** – Bath before bed? Reading before bed? Where does your child sleep, alone or with someone? Does your child use a blanket or pacifier? Does your child sleep in a crib or bed? What do you do in the middle of the night when your child cries; do you put your child in your bed, or do you comfort your child to sleep in his or her own bed? Does your child listen to music while going to sleep? Does your child have a nightlight?
- **Discipline** – Rewards and punishment: How do you give praise: vocally, or through gifts, an allowance, charts, and so on? What are the consequences for behaviors you do not want your child to engage in? Do you use corporal punishment? Do you give your child a time-out, send your child to his or her room, put your child in the corner, ground him or her (and if so, for how long and for what consequences), do you remove some of your child's privileges, and so on? Will you use carry-over discipline between the two homes? (For example, if the child has been grounded in one home and the grounding period isn't over before the exchange, does the grounding carry over to the other home?) Will you use a behavioral chart in both homes?
- **Relationships** – If you are not divorced, should you wait until after the divorce is finalized prior to introducing your child to a new significant other, and if so, how long after? What is the minimal time you date someone prior to introducing or reintroducing your child to that person? What do you want to make sure potential significant others know about your agreement before they decide to become involved? Will you define what terms your child may use when referring to stepparents (first name, Mom/Dad, or Stepmom/Stepdad), or will you allow your child to make that decision?
- **Daily Routines** – For younger children, what are the daily routines? What baby care products do you use? What diapers? What formulas? When do you switch foods? When and how do you potty train? Will you use a pacifier or walker? What is your child's bedtime? Will your child sleep with adults or in his or her own room?
- **Illness** – If your child is sick, do you still exchange? Should you keep a medicine checklist, so you are giving medicines about the same time and noting reactions to the medications? Should each of you be able to attend doctor's appointments, and should each of you be notified in advance (barring an emergency) of upcoming appointments?
- **Special Needs** – Does your child have special needs? Do both coparents need to attend child-related appointments together? Will your child's special needs affect the schedule between homes? Do you need to duplicate medical items, such as nebulizers? Will one parent be the primary caretaker, or will you both be equal caretakers?
- **Cell phone and Internet** – At what age, if ever, do you both agree you will allow your child to have a cell phone or access the Internet? What are the rules in both homes for cell phone and Internet usage? Can either of you post pictures of or information about your child on the Internet, and if so at what age and what kind of information?
- **Extracurricular Activities** – Do you both need to agree per enrollment period before enrolling your child, especially in events that might occur during the other parent's parenting time? Do you both need to agree prior to removing your child from an activity? Should you tell your child you support an activity before you talk to the other parent? If an event, such as a wedding, occurs during the other parent's parenting time, should your child be excused from his or her extracurricular activity?
- **Religion** – Will your child be raised in one faith, two faiths, or with no religious training? Will those values change, depending on who each parent is in a relationship with? Are there specific religious days that need to be incorporated into your plan? Are there specific values you want to incorporate into your plan? Do you need to mutually agree on religious activities and practices?
- **Supervision** – What are your limits on adult supervision of your child? Can your child ride bicycles in the street alone? Can your child run down the block to a neighbor's? Does your child need to check in



with you upon arrival? Who are considered appropriate supervisors for the child? (All relatives, some relatives?) Do nannies or babysitters have to be approved by both parents before being hired? At what age can your child be left home alone and for how long?

- **Terminology** – What words will you use (“visiting,” “living with,” “when you are at your other home”)? Will you refer to the other parent as “her mother/father” or as “my ex”? What terms are appropriate for each parent and for other relatives?
- **Peer Relationships** – Can your child still have sleepovers and independent relationships with friends near the home of their mother/father during the other parent’s parenting time?
- **Other Family Members** – Will your child be able to see all family members independent of which parent he or she is with, or will your child spend time only with maternal family during maternal time and vice versa? Will all family members be invited to your child’s birthday parties? Are there family members your child should not see or who your child should always be supervised with?
- **Child Care** – Will you use one child-care provider, daycare, and nanny, or two? What age does a child-care provider need to be? Should you offer the other parent the opportunity to care for your child before you offer it to anyone else? Does the “anyone else” include grandparents, stepparents, and live-ins or not? Do you offer the opportunity for a span of two hours or more, or only if you will be gone overnight?
- **Trips** – If your child will be out of the area during your parenting time, do you need to provide your coparent with the basic travel itinerary? If so, what needs to be included in the notice? How far in advance do you need to provide the information? At what age can your child travel alone?
- **Professional Services** – Who will make decisions regarding the professionals who provide services for your child? Will those decisions be made jointly or by just one parent? Will one parent make the education decisions and the other the medical? Should both parents be listed as contacts on professional forms completed for your child?
- **Online tools** – Will you both use online tools to help you in shared parenting? Will you use e-mail to communicate agreements? Will you use any coparenting programs, such as www.ourfamilywizard.com?
- **Distance** – Will you have a geographical restriction regarding where your child will reside? Will there be a maximum distance between the two homes?
- **Schedule** – What schedule will your child have between the two homes? Will the school year schedule be different than the summer schedule? Will the schedule change as your child matures? What voice, if any, will your child have in that schedule? Does the schedule change depending on the distance between homes?
- **Holiday Schedules** – How do you celebrate? Will one parent have Christmas Eve and the other Christmas Day? Do you rotate Christmas Day and Eve with one parent one year and the other the next? Which holidays do you observe? Do you have religious issues related to holidays? What will be the schedule on your child’s birthdays or on either parent’s birthday? What will you do when there are federal holidays or when school is not in session due to a teacher in-service day?
- **School Work and Study Habits** – Will you use the same routine in both homes for dealing with homework or studies? How do you handle a project that may take longer than a day for your child to complete? If necessary, does that project transfer between homes?
- **Car** – Do you need to create a mutually agreed upon driving contract for your teen? Will the car be the teen’s car, or will it be a car you are letting them borrow? Will the teen’s behavior affect his or her use of the vehicle? Who will teach your teen to drive?
- **Child’s Property** – What do you do with your child’s clothes? Do each of you keep equal stock, or does one send a suitcase with all of your child’s belongings?
- **Stepparents** – What do you want to make sure potential significant others know about your agreement before they decide to become involved as a stepparent? Should stepparents be present at appointments for your child (doctor, school, and so on) without the mutual agreement in advance of the parents? Should stepparents take on the role of exchanging the children? Should stepparents be involved in calling or e-mailing the other household in nonemergency situations without agreement of both parents?



- Should stepparents schedule appointments for your child? Should stepparents be consulting with professionals for your child without the mutual agreement of both parents? Should stepparents be listed as contacts on important information for your child?
- What are mutually agreed-upon boundaries both parents want stepparents to respect? Should stepparents talk to your child about subjects such as drugs, sex, religion, and so on? Should stepparents be allowed to discipline your child, and if so, what are the limits?
- Should your child remain with the stepparent if you are not present to care for your child during your parenting time, or should the coparent be asked first if he or she would like to care for your child? Should your child be allowed to sleep in the same bed with a stepparent whether or not one of the parents is in the bed? How should a stepparent act when the other parent is present?
- **Child Care Expenses** – An important component of a coparenting plan addresses the finances of raising a child. Kids are *very* expensive! Will one parent pay some to the other to cover the child's expenses? Will bills be split or covered by one parent? How will school activities or extracurricular events be covered? What about expenses for extracurricular activities, scholastic events, religious events, and college? How will medical, dental, or optical expenses be covered? Who will cover the health insurance for your child, and how will the cost of the insurance be addressed?
- **Decisions** – Who will make final decisions when all else fails, or what steps will you take before bringing issues to court (for example, will you try mediation)?

