

PARENTING PLANNING

With all our experience as adults we still find it difficult to understand and cope with the highs and lows of relationship breakdowns. Separation and divorce often throw us into a sea of emotional turmoil. One day we're standing on terra firma. It may not be the best relationship in the world but it's what we know, what we're used to, what we understand. Then it breaks down, we're launched into the unknown, swimming against the tide, trying hard to re-establish ourselves, often grabbing the first bit of ground that floats by. It could be a new love, a change of scenery anything that feels just a little like normal. It's probably the wrong time, wrong reason, wrong person but it somehow feels right.

We expect a lot, when we ask our children to understand. Quite often they too are swimming, caught up in the adult conflict. Difficult though it is, no matter what you are feeling, it is very important that you put the needs of your children first. In fact properly focussing on the children and their future can help the adults to come to terms with their own difficulties.

When a parent moves away from the family home it's not surprising that many children feel a great sense of loss. Trying to cope with the hurt can cause them to become angry they may even blame themselves for the adult problems and experience a sense of guilt. Children can be, and are drawn into all sorts of conflicts and arguments not just those between their parents but also those between extended family and friends who take sides. Parents and other adults such as family members and close friends can help to lessen these difficulties by working together and co-operating.

One way of ensuring that you focus on the needs of your children is to involve them in a Parenting Plan. Parenting planning allows you to think about all of the aspects of your children's future and gives them the opportunity to talk through their concerns with both parents. The Parenting Plan should start from the agreed position that children are entitled to a relationship with both of their parents. The fact that they will not be living together should not mean that the children miss out on the absent parent's love and care, or their extended family.

"Research shows that it is normally in the child's best interests if:

- Children are raised by both parents whether or not they live together, as long as it is safe.
- Each parent supports their children to enjoy a positive relationship with the other parent.
- Children are clear about the arrangements for spending time with each parent.
- Children should not be exposed to sudden changes in arrangements unless it is unavoidable.
- Children should not be exposed to continuing conflict as it can harm them.
- Parents support children to keep in touch with important people in their lives, such as wider family members and close family friends.
- New partners support the arrangements and have a good relationship with your child. They can really help to make things work without replacing you as a parent." (Putting your children first – a guide for separating parents – Department for education and skills).

No two families are the same and as such every parenting plan is different. Where children are at risk then a Parenting Plan may not be appropriate. Thankfully, this is rare, and although it can be hard and upsetting the evidence shows that in time, most children find that things do get better and that they eventually feel okay.

END.

PARENTING PLAN

Remember that each child's needs are different and that they should be consulted (age appropriate of course) and their views and feelings taken into account. Because they are siblings and live together, does not mean that the parenting plan will be same. There will be differences and as such it is essential to prepare separate plans for each child.

A Parenting Plan should not be set in stone. Situations change, children grow up, parents find new partners and have responsibility for other children. Think about what the future may hold and try to build change into the plan. At the very least, make the provision to change and alter the plan when necessary.

CHILD'S NAME.....

ALSO KNOWN AS.....

DATE OF BIRTH.....

NAMES OF SIGNIFICANT PERSONS (Grand parents, absent parents etc)

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

THE CHILD/REN WILL MOSTLY LIVE

AT.....

WITH.....

WHAT WILL BE THE DAY TO DAY CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS? (How will they spend time with each of you?)

HOW WILL THEY TRAVEL BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT ADDRESSES?

(Who will be responsible for the travel arrangements and costs?)

WHAT WILL BE THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR POSTPONED VISITS?

(Who will tell the children and how will another visit be arranged)

HOW WILL THE CHILDREN CONTACT THEIR ABSENT PARENT

(Will they have their own mobile/E-mail address? Who will pay the bills?)

WHAT ARE THE AGREED HOUSE RULES?

(Rules and discipline for the children should be agreed especially bed times, smoking, drugs, etc etc)

WHO CAN LOOK AFTER THE CHILDREN IF THE PARENT IS NOT THERE?

STAYING CONTACT (Overnight stays)

WHO CAN THE CHILDREN CONTACT?

(Are there friends or family members they should not contact?)

WHAT WILL BE THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SPECIAL DAYS?

(Birthdays, religious festivals, family parties and events etc?)

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL UPBRINGING.

WHAT ARE THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE CONTINUING OF A PARTICULAR FAITH OR CULTURAL TRADITION?

ARE OTHER SIGNIFICANT PEOPLE INVOLVED? DO THEY NEED TO BE WITH THE CHILD/REN AT PARTICULAR CEREMONIES OR EVENTS?

WILL YOUR CHILD/REN NEED TO SPEAK ANOTHER LANGUAGE? HOW WILL THEY CONTINUE TO DEVELOP THIS?

SCHOOL.

WHO WILL TELL THE SCHOOL ABOUT THE CHANGES?

HOW WILL THE ABSENT PARENT KEEP IN TOUCH WITH SCHOOL? RECEIVE SCHOOL REPORTS? ATTEND SCHOOL EVENTS?

HOW WILL YOU DISCUSS CHANGES OF SCHOOL?

HOW WILL YOU MAKE CHOICES OF SCHOOLS FOR YOUR CHILDREN?

HOW WILL YOU DISCUSS IMPORTANT CHOICES?

(Selection of courses, health education, careers, school trips, out of hours activities and payments)

HOW WILL YOU MAINTAIN YOUR CHILD/REN'S OUT OF SCHOOL ACTIVITIES OR HOBBIES WHEN THEY ARE AWAY FROM THEIR MAIN HOME?

HOLIDAYS.

HOW WILL YOU DIVIDE THE TIME?

CAN YOU BOTH TAKE THEM ON HOLIDAY?

(Out of the Country, on activity holidays, with other people etc?)

HEALTH.

WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ROUTINE ARRANGEMENTS AND APPOINTMENTS?

WHAT WILL BE THE ARRANGEMENTS TO SHARE INFORMATION?

(Allergies, regular medication, informing one another about hospital visits or emergencies?)

WHAT WILL BE THE AGREED PROCEDURE IF ONE OF THE PARENTS ARE ILL OR CAN NOT LOOK AFTER YOUR CHILD/REN?

OTHER ARRANGEMENTS.

FAMILY PETS.

LEARNING TO DRIVE.

SATURDAY JOBS/PAPER ROUNDS.

FUTURE CHANGES.

NEW ADULT RELATIONSHIPS.

(How will you tell the child/ren?)

MOVING HOME.

(Especially if you are moving out of the area).

HOW WILL YOU NEGOTIATE CHANGES TO THE PARENTING PLAN?

Once you have completed your Parenting Plan it should be agreed and signed by those involved. This is not so that it can be enforced. It demonstrates your joint commitment to making it work. Copies should be distributed to the parents and children and anyone else you think may benefit from it.