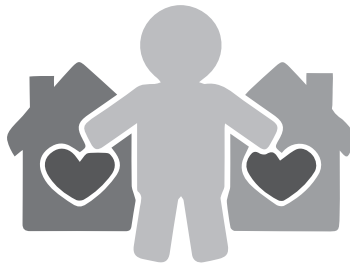


*The Guide that Helps Parents Shift from Fighting for Parental Rights
to Fighting Together for What's Right for Kids!*

FAMILY-CENTERED PARENTING PLANNING

.....

**Keeping Kids Central,
Not Caught in the Middle**



Karen Bonnell, MS, Co-Parent Coach

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Cover and Interior Design: Kathryn Campbell

Family-Centered Parenting Planning
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ISBN-13: 978-1729659236

ISBN-10: 1729659233

Printed in the United States of America by Kindle Direct Publishing,
an Amazon Company

Published in the United States of America by
CMC Publishers, Kirkland, Washington

www.coachmediateconsult.com

www.elisebuiefamilylaw.com

A NOTE TO PARENTS

An Intimate Partnership May End. Parenting is “Until Death Do You Part.”

Now that you’ve decided to end your intimate partnership, your job is to figure out how to manage the complex feelings involved in letting go of each other personally while continuing a constructive ongoing relationship as parents. There are many metaphors for this transition. We describe the process as “uncoupling” your adult relationship while strengthening a “business-like” relationship for raising your children together living apart.

You’ll be asking a lot of yourself (and your co-parent) as you grieve and recover from the stress of the inevitable changes that come with restructuring family life from one home into two. Be gentle with yourself. And be persistent in your effort to let go of thoughts that precipitate unsettled emotions. Your children’s post-divorce adjustment will be correlated with your ability to round the corner out of anger and despair into equanimity. Make that your North Star!

Choose supportive professionals, family members, and friends who encourage and join you in holding a vision of a positive future where you and your co-parent work well together to provide what your children need as they continue to grow up strong and resilient. Your budding confidence in a positive future trickles down to your children and becomes their anchor during this sea of change.



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What is Co-Parenting?

Co-parenting is the term that describes two parents who are no longer parenting together in one home as part of an intimate partnership, but rather are parenting their children while living apart. The level of *togetherness* or collaboration can vary from very little collaboration (as in parallel parenting) to highly integrated.

Children do not need their parents to be “friends.” They need them to develop an ease with one another for transitions, school and extra-curricular events, and similar situations where being all together serves the child’s needs. Parents who coordinate and keep their children’s needs and interests central don’t power struggle over personal points of view, but rather look together at what the child needs and how to provide for those needs in each home. When parents communicate effectively, set each other up for success, and respectfully cherish each other’s contributions to their children’s lives, kids benefit!

The question is not whether you’ll be co-parenting if you’re both involved in your children’s lives, the question is how *skillfully* and respectfully will you co-parent. For more detailed information on skillfully co-parenting, see “The Co-Parenting Handbook” by Bonnell and Little.

What About Parallel Co-Parenting?

Children can thrive in co-parenting relationships that have very little integration (referred to as “parallel co-parenting”) as long as parents are capable of planning for children effectively, ensure that child-related expenses are managed without conflict, and can come together to solve significant developmental problems when they arise. If good fences make for good neighbors, respectful parallel parenting allows two parents who would otherwise be struggling emotionally, to settle down and take good care of their children without undue triggers and emotional complexity from ongoing interaction with one another.

Co-parents who know they’ll do best with minimal contact with the children’s other parent, often benefit from the support of a co-parenting coach or parenting coordinator for the first year or two after divorce to ensure children’s needs don’t fall through the cracks or get embroiled in parental conflict when coordinating is necessary. We recommend if parents are repeatedly falling into high conflict, this be a prescribed part of their parenting plan. That way, when needed, the new co-parents can have the support of a facilitator and a safe environment to learn new skills in order to co-parent effectively in the future.

What's Best for Kids?

Children don't need perfect parents — they need two calm and engaged “good-enough” parents. In divorce, the concept of “what's best for kids” can be used as a weapon, as a justification to limit a parent's time or compete for “who's the best parent.” This is unequivocally *not* what's best for kids.

Children's positive well-being is correlated with their parents' ability to stay lovingly engaged in their lives, continue to meet their needs effectively, provide adequate structure and warmth, and to remain empathetic to their emotions (what we call “attuned parenting”). On-going competition, negativity, and conflict are in direct opposition of what's best for kids.

If your divorce process is heading into a negative, downward spiral, put on the brakes and assess your options. You can keep your children central without putting them square in the middle of unnecessary battling between you and your co-parent.

Parenting is not a competitive sport. The only real losers when this happens are the kids.

Do the Children Have a Say?

There are many ways a child's thoughts, feelings, needs and interests can come in to the parenting planning process when parents believe that's an important step prior to finalizing a plan. Let's take a look at some of the more common ways that can occur:

- **You both listen to your kids!** Often times parents are hearing similar things from the kids about the children's worries or needs with regard to the divorce. In those cases, parents plan together about how best to mitigate concerns, assuage worries, and confidently guide children through the family changes.
- **Sometimes kids tell parents what they think the parent wants to hear.** We call this "preaching to the choir," which indicates a child's desire to align with a parent, take care of a parent, or perhaps indicates feeling very much caught in the middle of an impossible relationship bind. Please be very careful about asking your children *what they want* as if their answer now has weight that disrupts you and your co-parent from sorting this out as parents.
- **A Child Specialist interviews children and brings their voice into the process.** Child Specialists are trained at talking with kids about divorce, about what's worrying them, what's working as their parents separate and what's hurting. A skilled child specialist then sits down with parents and the mediator or your legal team and shares that information. This is particularly helpful when parents see their children or their needs very differently.

- **A Guardian Ad Litem is assigned by the court.** In high-conflict cases or situations that the court deems it necessary, the court will assign a professional to care for the children's needs and interests in the parenting planning process. This person will interview not only the children, but also many adults who might assist in better understanding what the children may need as the family restructures.

We always say: "Children have a voice, but they don't have a vote." Ultimately, parents (or if parents can't agree, the judge) decide on the schedules and content of a parenting plan.

Does Past Parenting Predict the Future?

Parents often wonder if there's been a parent who has been at home raising children and a parent who has been earning a living outside the home, if the previous at-home parent should continue to be the primary parent after divorce. Our answer is "not necessarily." Couples often create a division of labor in a one home family that has nothing to do with a shared desire to both be counted as nurturing parents.

There are many factors that can galvanize this split in responsibility as a marriage begins to deteriorate—giving an impression that one parent doesn't *care*. Having never made a school lunch before or having skipped every parent-teacher conference does not necessarily imply a lack of interest, but may more realistically reflect a trust in the agreed upon division of responsibility. Once the decision to divorce is made, the previously outside parent may want to step up and step into a substantial role in providing day-to-day care for the children. When this happens, children benefit from the increased attention from the once less-engaged parent.

The questions should be: How will each of us provide quality parenting time and on what type of schedule? "What's the best way to support our children's strong and engaged relationship with each of us now and in the future?"

What are the Important Two-Home Family Parenting Skills?

Co-parents are first and foremost good parents, solo parenting on an agreed upon and predictable schedule. Children master the rhythm of going back and forth between their homes with each parent without stress or confusion. We call this the “river” or rhythm that flows underneath their day-to-day life. Maintaining this rhythm within reason is an important two-home family skill.

Clear, respectful communication allows both parents to stay on top of the important information during each residential stay with the other parent. Concise email practices, transition emails that update one another, and tri-annual business planning meetings keeps schedules, holidays, development, extracurricular activities and so forth on track.

Children don’t need their respective homes to be identical. However, the younger the child, the more similar their homes should be—and in particular the daily rhythms of meals, bedtime rituals and sleep patterns. As children get older, they are more capable of increasing differences.

What you want to avoid is children wasting time and developmental energy trying to navigate the differences between their homes, rather than investing in mastery and competence over the tasks set before them with each step of growing up. When parents stay relatively on the same page, children thrive!

Primary and Shared Parenting Plans— What Does the Research Tell Us?

Family Court Review, October 2017

Special Issue on Shared Parenting Time After Separation

Shared-time parenting, refers specifically to the physical custody of the child, is defined by children who spend at least 25-50% of their overnights with each parent. Shared parenting is variously referred to as joint physical custody, shared custody, shared care, shared residence, alternating residence, and co-parenting.

Bruce Smyth (October 2017) Family Court Review

Here's the distinction between *equal* versus *unequal* shared custody:

Recent study of 12,279 Divorce Cohorts in Wisconsin (1987—2011)

In that time frame, shared custody has grown from 12% of cases to 50% of cases

In most recent cohorts, equal shared custody (50/50) was twice as likely as unequal shared custody.

Meyer, Cancian, & Cook (October 2017) Family Court Review

Research also tells us that a strong and engaged relationship with each parent is correlated with children's emotional and physical well-being. Creating a two-home family that feels like *home with each parent* encourages that sense of security, love and care by parents that supports children throughout childhood.

What Does it Take to Co-Create Your Children’s Parenting Plan?

We recommend you do your homework. A parenting plan will likely be the most important contract you ever create and sign. Your parenting plan will be the glue, the conflict manager, and the foundation that guides the rhythms and rules for your co-parenting relationship and children’s two-home family life. A well designed parenting plan goes well beyond checking boxes or filling in blanks!

The person helping you with your parenting plan should be well-informed about growth and development and be able to help you anticipate how and when a plan might change. A parenting plan not only supports your children’s unfolding development, but should be structured to absorb inevitable changes in family life over time. So, ideally, the person assisting you has insight into family systems and two-home family development including the impact of step-relationships when that time comes.

Working together to talk through how best to meet your children’s needs together living apart is an enormous gift you can give your children. This is your first task as new co-parents, which requires coming to grips with the importance of your ongoing relationship as the children’s co-parenting executive officers and co-parenting financial officers. No one is better equipped to identify how to keep your kids central than the two of you. Co-parent coaches, mediators and family-centered attorneys who value your co-parenting relationship are invaluable resources.

More resources: “The Parenting Plan Workbook” by Bonnell and Soleil with coordinated You-Tube video series available on Karen’s channel.

How Does a Child's Growth and Development Inform Residential Schedules?

Being separated from a parent is hard for kiddos. Learning to let go of one parent's hand to take the other's hand for a few nights away can be stressful enough without asking a child to go "too long" without a chance to see each parent, to refuel, to reconnect. The occasional, successful week-long vacation with a parent for a four-year-old does not indicate that the little one is ready for a week-on/week-off schedule!

Just because a child can adjust to a schedule, does *not* mean that it's an appropriate or healthy schedule for the child. Children adapt to all sorts of things when they have to. Our job is to be sure we're not asking too much too often for their own well-being. When parents manage daily residential schedules well, children learn to move back and forth without undue stress. Each of their homes equipped with necessities and cherished personal items. Parents are responsible for ironing out the wrinkles of two-home family life, which means dealing with the occasional forgotten lovey or algebra book without fall-aparts.

Developmentally appropriate parenting schedules refer to the rhythms that work best for children across childhood. They focus on the frequency of changes in that underlying river based on typical psychological development. Matching these schedules to your child's particular needs is key. You will find specific ideas about developmentally, child-centered residential options in the appendix.

Can a Residential Schedule Change Over Time?

Parents who work with a professional well-versed in child and family development often craft a parenting plan that includes “tiers” or steps / changes to a child’s residential schedule built into the parenting plan. A developmentally appropriate parenting plan anticipates schedule transitions that take into consideration the child’s age and stage of development and anticipate the parents’ parenting time capacity.

Other parents may build in “reviews” of the residential schedule right from the beginning. This is relatively typical if parents are crafting a parenting plan for an infant and wish to create a parenting plan that meets the needs of the child and two-home family up to entrance to school. Then the winter prior to fall entrance to school, the parents return to mediation to craft a school-age parenting plan.

Parents have the option to make changes to the residential schedule whenever they are in mutual agreement. If parents decide to make substantive changes to the documented residential schedule, they may want to consult with an attorney about whether a new parenting plan should be submitted to the court, or if simply writing new agreements, signing and attaching the amended schedule to the current parenting plan is sufficient.

The other ways that residential schedules may require change is in the event of a major change of circumstance such as a work schedule that now makes it impossible for a parent to meet the commitments established in the parenting plan, a significant change in health status for a parent or child, or a relocation of a

parent out of the child's school district or beyond a reasonable geographic area for continuing the current plan.

As with everything *family*, we encourage you to consult with a co-parenting coach, facilitative mediator and/or a supportive family-centered attorney for assistance when any of these changes result in difficult conflict.

Do Teens Get to Decide Their Residential Schedule?

An often-asked question is whether a teenager should be able to decide their residential schedule. We say no! Allowing a child (teenager or not) to determine when they will see a parent moves the child out of childhood and into adult business. Bringing a child into the position of scheduling time with their parents can erode the parent/child relationship and compromise the child's normal growth and development. Putting a child in the position of refusing time or choosing one parent over the other is a heavy burden, especially in an already unstable time in their lives.

As a practical matter, it can be virtually impossible to force a mid-or older teenager to stay at a residence when they don't want to be there. Most teenagers want independence and control over their own schedule. Thus, they may be angry or resentful if parents ignore their wishes. In this case, listening to the teen's concerns and taking their needs into account can help the parents determine *together* what residential schedule is in the best interest of their child. This is not letting the teen decide. Your older teen has a voice; they don't have a vote. Young adults often use the structure set out in the residential schedule when planning breaks from college and family vacations in order to be free from the overwhelming fear of disappointing someone that they love. "If it's an odd year, Thanksgiving's at Dad's."

Overnights or “Parenting Time”— What Matters?

The law is set up to focus on overnights as overnights can impact child support and can impact which parent is named the primary residential parent (in Washington) and thus, can impact a parent’s ability to relocate with the children. But, as far as kiddos are concerned, the real issue is *their relationship with each parent*.

Older teens prefer fewer transitions (as in week-on/week-off schedules) or may even request having a “home base” rather than transitioning from home to home. Ideally, parents can focus on spending quality parenting time with their children rather than arguing over overnights. Especially in the context of older children, parents can find a vast amount of parenting time that involves no overnights such as transporting kids to and from school (the car is an amazing vessel for open teen communication), transportation to and from practices and lessons, attending sporting events and performances. Quality parenting time is far more important than counting (or fighting about) overnights. Maintaining a strong support system for your child through quality, consistent parenting time is what matters in helping your child reach their highest potential.

Parents interested in schedules that are unrestricted by or that don’t dictate child support obligations can talk to their attorneys about options. Ask about deviations from typical child support formulas.

Do All the Kids Need to Follow the Same Residential Schedule?

All of the kids do *not* need to follow the same residential schedule. Generally, residential schedules are drafted to fit the different stages and developmental phases of a child's life. For instance, a schedule for an infant may include more frequent time with each parent because babies have a limited ability to remember and need predictable routines. Toddlers are similar and need an opportunity to develop trust in their attachments to both parents, while school age children are more comfortable with and benefit from predictable, non-stressful time away from their parents. School-age children may more easily adapt to having two homes and thrive when both parents are involved in their school and activities. Teenagers have a need to and, indeed may prefer, to spend time with friends instead of parents. Thus, teens will require a residential schedule that allows for the growing independence that accompanies this stage but considers the need for a solid base of support from both parents at the same time.

Each child's developmental stage and the logistics of different schedules should be taken into consideration when determining the children's residential time with each parent. It may be difficult to craft a specific plan for each child if there are a wide range of ages, but the children's best interests will be served if the co-parents can work out the most appropriate plan for each child's developmental phase in life.

Why Consider Short-Term and Long-Term Holiday Plans?

We consider the first two-years after separation the divorce adjustment period. The first year is filled with anniversaries that echo the loss and change associated with restructuring a family—the first birthday as a two-home family, the first holiday celebrations after parents separated. The second year brings a balance and reassurance that certain kinds of time will be spent with each parent—spring break with one last year, and with the other this year.

Parents often soften these changes by agreeing to share certain events, or dividing days like Christmas into two pieces to ensure parents and kids get to see each other. This can work well in the first two—four years. Beyond that, parenting plan holiday schedules that continue to keep parents tied together for holidays or breaks don't take into consideration the long-term adjustment and evolution of family life. What starts out as a tie that binds, becomes a binding tie that disrupts and limits. Similarly, requiring children to transition in the middle of holiday celebrations for their entire childhood never allows them to experience a “whole” holiday in each of their homes.

Leaning into the idea that everyone will adjust to these new rhythms without daily pain of loss and separation can be very, very difficult at the time parents are forced to create a parenting plan. Trusting in the unfolding new normal is your task.

How Do You Ensure Child-Centered Transitions?

Many parenting plans are structured so that transitions occur from school or daycare. This is generally easy for children once they get the pattern of “who’s picking up today?” Parents will need to develop a strategy for transitioning the children’s belongings from home-to-home. Children should not be asked to carry belongings to and from school. They’re not little carpetbaggers with their belongings on their back.

For those transitions that occur between parents, we ask that you remember that you have one job and one job only during a transition, which is the *loving, stress-free exchange* of your child from your care to the care of the other parent. Younger children typically manage transitions with less emotional stress when the current residential parent delivers them to the receiving parent.

Transitions should be handled in a brief, respectful and punctual manner. Parents are at ease with one another, whether they’re waiting in the car or walking children up to the porch. All adult matters should be handled outside of the transition—no cornering one another to have a much wanted conversation. Not the time. Focus on the kids, exchange a pleasantry or two about them, and go forward with the transition.

How Do You Communicate Constructively?

We encourage parents to communicate in a way that would survive the scrutiny of a boss or the family law judge. If you wouldn't want your style of speaking or writing to one another a matter of public record, you should change your style! Not because it will be public, but because it gives you a gauge to know you're "in bounds" with how you communicate with one another.

Communications should be limited to approximately 250 words per subject. Subjects are to be about children (after all, that's the purpose of your relationship now—raising wonderful kids!) Emails should be limited to two or more per week unless otherwise mutually agreed. All schedule changes and joint decisions are to be recorded in email. We ask that parents check their co-parenting email daily and do their best to respond within 24 hours.

Texting is a quick, easy way to communicate. Again, text communication should follow the same guidelines as above. Text is best for communicating short informational details, "I'll meet you with the children at the snack shack at 2 PM."

Most important aspects of healthy communication: Brief, respectful, child-centered, clear and thoughtful. When co-parents establish their preferred modes of communication, do your best to utilize them for one another.

What is Joint Decision Making?

Joint decision-making does not mean that *all* decisions regarding the children's everyday lives will be made together and does not correspond with primary residential time. Generally, the residential parent (the parent with whom the children are with) will make the day to day decisions required to manage the household. With joint decision-making, co-parents share responsibility for deciding major issues such as education, healthcare, and other significant life choices or developmental milestones. Joint decision-making co-parents share accountability for implementing decisions and paying the agreed-upon amounts for their children's needs.

For joint decision-making to be successful, parents must exercise respect, planning and focus. Regularly scheduled co-parent business meetings can help with planning and place the focus on current issues requiring joint decisions. Additionally, establishing mutually acceptable procedures to inform each other of important child-related matters will minimize conflict and encourage positive participation in the decision-making process. Remember, joint decision-making is a skill that needs to be practiced. Implementing good business practices and establishing reliable protocols can lessen conflict and lead to successful co-parenting and healthier children.

How Will You Resolve Conflict?

One of the most important parts of co-parenting is determining how you will resolve conflict in the future. Even the most thoughtful and thoroughly written parenting plans can give rise to conflicts. An interesting option that many co-parents are using is investing in a co-parent coach. The coach offers guidance to parents as they transition through the different stages of divorce and co-parenting. A co-parent coach's ongoing support for the family includes assisting in conflict resolution. Already equipped with an in-depth knowledge of the family, the coach can help explore the roots of the conflict and support the parents as they discuss the issues and come to an agreement.

There are several other options to think about when disputes arise. Generally, respectful dispute resolution (ADR) methods are a great way to start. One of the most popular ADR forms is mediation. In mediation, the two parties come together to work out the conflict with a neutral third party called a mediator. The mediator is trained in conflict resolution and can help the parties evaluate their goals and come to an agreement. The mediator cannot give legal advice and does not take sides. The goal of mediation is for the parties to work out an agreement that works for their two-home family. Mediations can be done with or without the participation of attorneys.

Arbitration is another way to resolve conflict outside of court. Arbitration is similar to a court-like scenario, in that both parties present their arguments and evidence to a decision maker (arbitrator). Arbitration is generally cheaper than going to court because it is more efficient, flexible and less formal. The arbitrator's decision can be brought to the Court for review if needed.

The last resort in any dispute should be going to court. If necessary, litigation will provide resolution to the conflict, but the decision will be made for the parties by a judge. In a court setting, there are very strict rules as to what information may be presented and how arguments can be made. Litigation is quite expensive and damaging to the future co-parent relationship. Because of the adversarial nature of the proceedings, taking a matter to court often heightens the level of conflict in the relationship.

Do We Need a Co-Parent Coach or Parenting Coordinator to Help us?

If you find yourself in an argument about absolutely everything with no quick resolution in sight, or if you are intimidated to express your opinion for fear of how your co-parent will respond, or if you and/or your co-parent have a disrespectful, negative way of communicating, a co-parenting coach is an essential part of your parenting planning process and first year or two post-decree. If you're both motivated to learn new ways of parenting together apart, get started *now*.

If one parent is unwilling or unable to work with a co-parenting coach to learn more functional patterns, a parenting coordinator might be a necessary addition to your co-parenting process. A parenting coordinator (PC) takes on multiple roles when dealing with a family. A PC is a facilitator of communication, a mediator of disputes, a parent educator when appropriate, an evaluator/investigator of specific problems and, in some instances, an arbitrator with decision-making authority. A PC serves as the intermediary between warring ex-spouses to ensure that the children are kept out of the middle of the conflict and decisions are made in a fair, timely fashion.

Does Your Attorney Find Workable Solutions and Diminish Conflict?

It is important that you identify if your attorney is helping you find workable solutions or encouraging further conflict. Attorneys can be essential in mitigating the conflict between separating parties. Separation and divorce impact children deeply. If the attorney you hire encourages the litigious nature of these proceedings, it can have a lasting negative impact on how your family communicates after divorce.

Even in high conflict divorces, attorneys can help set firm boundaries, establish protocols and provide direction for the parties. The attorney can help the parties develop a roadmap to reduce conflict and implement the correct conflict resolution mechanism. Divorces and separations are flooded with emotions and require life-changing decisions. Evaluate your attorney to see if they listen to you, helping you build your co-parent relationship and encouraging you to work towards a cooperative future. Having an attorney who promotes workable solutions is crucial because the decisions made in or out of court will greatly affect the rest of your life and, more importantly, your children's lives.

When is it OK to Start Dating Again?

There are three major considerations regarding dating:

1. Are you *really* ready or are you rebounding? Please take the time you need to recover and let go of one relationship before putting yourself on the emotional roller coaster of dating again.
2. How will dating impact your soon to be former partner's feelings about completing the divorce with you? If you are the person who asked for the divorce, who called the finish line on marital struggles, know that your soon-to-be-former partner may feel doubly hurt by you moving on in a way that feels dismissive of the significance of ending your current relationship.
3. Can you date without involving your children? You may be ready to date; your co-parent may be OK with you dating; however, your children are *not* ready to be involved in your dating life. Your job as a parent is to help your children settle into two-home family life competently before asking them to absorb more change, more new people, and more loss of what's familiar to them.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about when to start dating again. Often times, we recommend you wait to the turmoil associated with the divorce is over, agreements are signed, and life is beginning to stabilize before dating.

Why Do We Warn Co-Parents About Social Media (Sexting and Porn)?

Your social media and online habits can not only impact your divorce process but also your co-parenting relationship and, most importantly, your children's psychological well-being. As divorced parents, you are not the "moral police" but you are the co-CEO of Team Child.

1. It is safe to assume that both your co-parent and your children can see any information that you post on social media (whether they are "friends" with you or not). If you don't want something on Facebook or similar on the front page of the local newspaper, don't post it.
2. Even more important is the impact your social media activity might have on your kiddos. If you or your online friends are posting negative content about the other parent, you must assume that your children may see these negative comments now or in the future.
3. You neither want your children to find out about your new significant other based on your social media posts nor be exposed to adult sexual content. Most parents strive to tell their children a new relationship in a developmentally appropriate way.
4. If you hand over your phone (iPad, computer) to entertain your child while you wait at a restaurant or in the waiting room at the dentist be sure no "embarrassing" pictures or racy texts can pop up. The safest course of action is to not hand over your devices if you sext or access porn. Smart nine year olds know how to hack!

How Will You Build a Parenting Coalition When a Stepparent Enters the Children's Lives?

This may be impossible to imagine today. What we know is that one or both of you are likely to recouple in the next two to five years. For some reading this, the recoupling has already occurred. When we ask our children to allow another adult into their lives, this is no small requirement!

That first year of becoming a part of a two-home family system, a new romantic partner is on an extended job interview, under scrutiny and being watched closely for how they will impact the hard-earned co-parenting relationship as well as the children's adjustment. However much "in love" adults may be, the rest of the family is likely not-on-the-team yet. Take your time. Go slow. Be respectful of the relationships that exist and the unsettled feelings this new person may be unearthing for kids and co-parent.

In time, a caring adult who has taken the time to build relationships with children can be an important member of the two-home parenting coalition. The co-parents remain the decision makers, while stepparents join in the conversation with valuable insights and perspectives. When the time comes, reach out for support on how to do this well for kids! For more information on beginning to date as a parent and building a strong foundation for stepfamily read, "The Stepfamily Handbook" by Bonnell and Papernow.

APPENDIX

CHILD-CENTERED RESIDENTIAL SCHEDULE CONSIDERATIONS

Newborns: Birth to Three Months (referred to as “The Fourth Trimester” or “Kangaroo Pocket Time”)

****Must be handled skillfully****

- **Establishing breast feeding** in the first three months should be a priority for health of the infant and mother. Best if this can be accomplished without disadvantaging the non-breast-feeding parent with regard to regular access to the infant for bonding and secure attachment.
- Daily, at a minimum regular contact (multiple days a week), with both parents. The non-breast-feeding parent can provide relief to the breast-feeding mom by assisting with night care, spending two-hour blocks on a daily basis as scheduled, or even multiple two-hour windows/day of secure contact and care. **The goals are to allow the infant to develop a secure bond with both parents and both parents to gain confidence in their parenting.** The non-breast-feeding parent allows for healthy breaks for self-care, a nap and so forth to prevent exhaustion and burn-out for the breast-feeding parent. These visits often happen in the breast-feeding mom’s home if possible but can include taking the baby out as long as the baby is returned for feeding needs.

- Constructive when tension is very low between parents and transitions are easy for them. Both parents are committed to what's best for their new infant. High parental cooperation required to mitigate atmosphere of hostility /stress for the newborn.

Infants: Three to Twelve Months

****Parents will continue to need support for skillful parenting****

- Breast feeding is usually established at this point and pumping is an option. Once breast-feeding is established, both parents can feed the baby, which allows for longer visits and even overnights depending on the progression of secure attachment, the infant's temperament, and *parenting skill level*.
- Infants between four and seven months develop *object permanence*, which is to say that when an object disappears it still exists. Prior to this awareness, objects that disappear cease to exist in a meaningful way to infant. Regular, predictable contact assists the infant in developing trust in the world of their primary caregivers. Regular, predictable separation from a parent is well tolerated and does not threaten secure attachment (parents working, the occasional business trip, and so forth).
- Ideal parenting schedules include each parent providing the bedtime routine with baby 2—4 times a week even if provided in one parent's home. Weekend visits can extend to eight hours on both Saturday and Sunday. Positive to have at least one full day each weekend over an every-other-weekend schedule if both parents want/need weekend time. Regular, predictable contact care-time is the goal with each parent.

- Regular and frequent contact care-time and predictable schedules help infants establish their body rhythms and maintain secure attachment.
- Many securely attached infants thrive with overnights with both parents rotating back and forth as frequently as every-other-night. These infants have a sense of home and security with their parents that extend across two residences.
- The less frequent the contact with a parent, the greater the incidence of separation anxiety from the primary parent. Infants often experience developmentally predictable separation anxiety with an onset between six and 12 months lasting two - three months, which is not an indication of insecure attachment.

Watch birth mothers for post-partum depression and burn out particularly if the birth was associated with an unexpected outcome (such as Cesarean section, loss of support during the birthing process or shortly thereafter, announcement of divorce).

Junior Toddlers: 12—18 Months

****Watch the baby's development, temperament, and quality of parenting****

- Prolonged separations will precipitate the experience of “loss” and signs of “protest” on the part of both junior and senior toddlers. This is how a toddler tells us the experience of separation has gone from tolerable to intolerable (and frightening). A healthy residential schedule prevents regular triggering of intolerable separations. Signs of intolerable separation can include:

excessive clinginess, tantrums, crying, irritability, sleep disruption, inconsolable distress, and so forth.

- A good schedule for this age group is no more than two overnights away from either parent if the parents are attempting a fully shared schedule. (2-2-2-1 starting on Sunday evening and splitting quality parenting time for the single Saturday overnight). Another option is the non-residential parent is coming to the residence on Tues / Thurs to do dinner through bedtime routine (or wake-up through drop-off at daycare) with at least one overnight each weekend (Sat 9 AM—Sun 9 AM).
- The transition from junior toddlerhood (“I’ve got the world by the tail!”) to senior toddlerhood (“OH NO! I’m very little and everyone else is very big..”) is flagged by a brain growth spurt, with increased language skills, motor skills, and ...SEPARATION ANXIETY. Again, this is a normal response to rapid growth and an increased need for protection from their secure caregiver(s). Onset between 15 - 18 months, generally resolving around 20 - 22 months. Initiating an overnight schedule during the height of this developmental transition could be complicated. Regular contact with both parents continues to be very important.

Senior Toddlers: 18 - 36 months

**** Just because a child *adapts* to a schedule, does not indicate that it's developmentally appropriate****

- Once baby lands squarely in senior toddlerhood, we see a little one with almost no vestiges of infancy. Regular rhythms, naps, sleeping through the night, feeding practices are generally well established. Play is an important part of waking time. Interest in other toddlers is typical. Capacity to interact with other little ones without assistance/supervision, though, is not quite on board. Working on impulse control and the ability to say “no” and “I do it myself.”
- Since resistance and tantrums are all part of working through senior toddlerhood, transitions can become a target for working out a toddler’s need to say no. This can be eased by transitions from daycare or for the current residential parent to facilitate the transition by delivering to the receiving parent. Keeping transitions between parent’s predictable, brief, to include a bit of fun-ritual for toddler is best.
- Regression in some developmental tasks, such as potty training, should not be surprising for major schedule changes initiated during this time. This will be short-lived and not cause for alarm. If developmental disruption persists beyond three months, the parents should come together to look for other causes/stresses/concerns.
- Having older siblings helps younger children with residential transitions — being part of their “pack.”
- The 2-2-2-1 schedule is still ideal or similar schedule that allows for predictable care-giving and contact with each parent. Less frequent contact with one parent can work

as long as it's predictable and the toddler feels genuinely supported in both residences. Facetime is a wonderful tool to allow non-residential contact from time-to-time. An every-other-weekend schedule is likely to be confusing to the child if there's no other predictable contact in between.

- A variation on the 2-2-2-1 schedule prepares parents and toddlers an eventual 2-2-5-5 schedule is to create an overnight on Friday (pick up from daycare until Sat at 9 AM) for the Mon/Tues parent and an overnight on Sunday (Sunday 4 PM until return to daycare Monday) for the Wed/Thurs parent on the other's weekend. The impact is to create a "cuddle bump" in the middle of what will become the "five" in the schedule when the toddler moves into the pre-school/school years. Neither parent-child group is separated from one another for extended time; a sense of a weekend (all day Sat/Sun) begins to take shape.
- For parents who are not creating a fully-shared schedule, dividing the four—five overnights in a 4/10 or 5/9 schedule are best done as a Mon/Tues (or Wed/Thurs) one week and Friday/Saturday for the weekend on the other week. Depending on the age of the toddler, temperament and level of adjustment, the weekend could include Sunday night.
- Playdates with a parent are popularly used for this age group to ensure the child doesn't go too long without contact with a parent. The more these transitions are integrated into the child's typical routine the better. Key issue is the number of transitions a child is being asked to absorb in one day. If the child transitions easily, then great! If the child is falling-apart by the last transition, we know we're asking too much.

Preschoolers: Ages Three until entrance to Kindergarten

****Magical thinking, fish tales, and an important growth spurt
spotlights wild-life for these rapidly growing children****

- Great age to continue the 2-2-5-5 schedule with the “cuddle bump” which as a child approaches the age of five, can transition to a dinner date rather than an overnight. Now the full five overnights with one parent takes shape and weekends are less impacted.
- For children beginning a two-home family life, I would recommend the cuddle bump for a minimum of one year for children under age seven and then parents determine when to drop the cuddle bump out of the schedule based on the child’s competence and adjustment. I usually write that if one parent wants the cuddle bump to go forward for another year it will, and then it can drop out if they’re not in agreement.
- Many parents opt for a 2-2-3 schedule during the preschool years. This is developmentally appropriate, but can be difficult for activity schedules and parents work life (creating predictability for longer work days when off duty, and shorter days during residential time).
- For schedules that involve more overnights with one parent than the other, breaking the overnights in groups of two (or three) is best for this age group.
- For parents who want a 6/8 schedule, having the children return Sunday after dinner from the weekend (as opposed to return to school Monday morning) can work very well for launching the school week in a very predictable manner.

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Early School-Age: Six to Eight Year Olds

****A child's sense of family is central to their sense of comfort in the world****

- There are many ways to usher a child into a two-home family in this age group. The key consideration is to "build" the schedule to support the child's changing sense of family in a manner that allows competence building. Some parents will start with a 2-2-3 schedule and after a year progress to a 2-2-5-5. Others will consider a 3-4-4-3 and then progress to 2-2-5-5 to get full weekends as part of their longer-term schedule.
- Five overnights away from a parent are likely to unconstructively stretch a child until they are fully seven when initiating a residential schedule. For children who have been in two-home family life for a few years, the five overnights may be perfectly fine.

Schedules for Older Children: Developmental Considerations

- Parents often try out / practice a week-on/week-off schedule beginning the summer that their youngest is fully seven years old. This is a perfect time to spend some part of or all of the summer on this schedule.
- During the school year, I would not recommend a week-on/week-off schedule prior to fifth grade (age 10) except in specific circumstances for children who are clearly ready, often have older siblings, or a lifestyle that has prepared them for this rotation. Children on the spectrum may do better with a single weekly transition between homes.
- Middle-school children starting a two-home family schedule will benefit from a couple years of 2-2-5-5 over week-on/week-off in terms of emotional adjustment. Convert to week-on/week-off in high school if preferred.

Although we have focused on fully-shared (50/50) schedules, we want to be clear that we do not favor or recommend 50/50 schedules over other schedules. Parents seeking mediation / Collaborative-type divorce processes are regularly coming in requesting fully-shared schedules. The idea that any particular schedule should be the “default” does not respect the family- and child-centered importance of creating schedules that reflect the unique needs of the children and parenting capacity, as well as work schedules and so forth.

For a stay-at-home parent, the transition to two-home family life and sharing parenting time can require a dramatic emotional adjustment (especially with young children). Helping both parents value transitioning in a thoughtful and respectful manner

can preserve the co-parenting relationship for years to come. Beginning for some period of time as a 5/9, progressing to a 6/8 and resting into a 7/7 schedule may take a couple years, but can mean the difference between healthy post-divorce adjustment and *on-going conflicts and unsettled children* with damaging effects for everyone.

Similarly, a 50/50 schedule holds HIGH symbolic value for parents who want to be honored/recognized as “full” parents. Again, unpacking the symbolic nature of “50/50” can assist in choosing schedules that actually work better for all members of the two-home family not limited to percentages. I tell parents they are two 100% parents on duty at different times for the benefit of their kiddos and two-home family life. The notion that a parent is disadvantaged in the eyes of the court regarding relocation related to residential schedules results in parents fighting over even one overnight that often has nothing to do with children, parenting capacity, or anything significant other than *fear*. This will prevent many parents from having the openness to transitioning their children into two-home family life in a less dramatic manner: “I’m not moving out unless I have a 50/50 schedule.”

Fear of losing their children drives parents in all kinds of unproductive directions when determining a parenting plan. As professionals, assisting them to move out of fear, settle down, and realize the enormous value of two “good enough” parents caring for children assists with making sound, respectful decisions for the family. Building a parenting plan as a defensive tool for future litigation results in disrupting the ideal of family- and child-centered outcomes.

Our job is to find a way to respectfully resolve this tension in ways that support the next generation of children of divorced parents.

TRI-ANNUAL CO-PARENT BUSINESS MEETING CHECKLIST

Guiding Co-Parents through the Planning Process

Consider meeting at least three times of year: August for the first semester of school (Sept- Jan), again in January for the second semester of school (February—May), and in March for summer planning (June- August).

School Schedule/Summer Schedule

- Planning for vacations, non-school days, holidays, camps, etc.
- Parent/teacher conference dates
- Before/after school care
- Extracurricular activities (including sports, arts, groups, etc.)
- Bedtime—ensuring adequate rest
- Other

Academic Concerns

- Tutoring, testing/evaluations, or consults with educational specialists
- Homework issues

- Special projects for this grade level that need parental management
- Electives: addressing choices and managing equipment like music instruments, sports equipment etc.
- Other

Social Development

- Discuss peer relationships and exchange contact information as needed
- Anticipate developmental steps like starting to date
- Any behaviors at either home that are of concern
- Celebrate how wonderfully your child is growing
- Other

Physical Development

- Plan for primary care and dental care appointments
- Other health care related issues
- Illness concerns/management
- Self-care progression (diet, exercise, hygiene, etc.)
- Other

Emotional Development

- Self-esteem/self-confidence progression
- Any mental health/anxiety-related concerns
- Behavior management concerns (angry outbursts?)
- Other

Household Changes

- Changes in routines
- Anticipating a move
- Adding new family members (new pet, roommate, partnership)
- Extended family news that impacts children
- Other

Other Considerations

RESIDENTIAL TRANSITION REPORT BETWEEN CO-PARENTS

Transition notes, whether provided by email (OFW or similar platform) or voicemail are intended to help your co-parent be the best parent they can be to your child(ren) as they begin a residential stay with the kids. Consider what information is useful without “managing” the other household. We always say, be constructive not instructive.

You may not have anything to communicate about many of the areas below and can say, “School’s good, friends are good” as a way of filling in the blanks. Transition Reports are most useful after three overnight stays or more with a parent.

School

- Homework follow-through/special project updates
- School-Home communication that your co-parent may need
- Before/After school care updates
- Special events, concerts, awards, to share
- Extra-curricular activity updates
- Special needs, tutoring, etc.
- Other

Friendships/Peer Relationships

- Anything to discuss about peer relationships—concerns or things to “watch”

- Updates on invitations, slumber parties, etc.
- Social networking, phone use/texting, “dating”
- Other

Physical Health

- Updates on health-care appointments, rescheduled, etc.
- Other health care related issues—exercises, therapies, etc.
- Illness concerns—medications both prescribed or over-the-counter, fevers, rashes
- Physical complaints (tummy aches, headaches, etc.)
- Changes in eating patterns
- Other

Emotional Well-Being

- Any mental health/anxiety-related concerns
- Sleep issues?
- Difficulties with behavior
- Other

Household Changes

- Changes in routines
- Other

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen Bonnell, MS: Karen has over 30 years of experience working with couples and families facing transition, loss, growth and change. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Karen has been board certified and licensed as an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner since 1982. She regularly writes for, speaks to and trains health care and legal professionals. Karen’s work as a Collaborative Divorce Coach spurred her determination to write *The Co-Parenting Handbook* with Kristin Little, Child Specialist. Parents learn the best ways to support their children, strengthen their co-parenting, and discover the necessary tools to skillfully create a two-home family. *The Parenting Plan Workbook* followed with contributor Felicia Malsby Soleil, JD. Karen and Felicia built a workbook and four-plus hours of coaching seminars (*The Parenting Plan Workbook Video Series*), which provide valuable access to the mechanics behind writing a strong, child-centered parenting plan. Along with national stepfamily expert Patricia Papernow, PhD , Karen authored *The Stepfamily Handbook: From Dating to Getting Serious to Creating a ‘Blended’ Family*. Karen has served on the board of King County Collaborative Law and Collaborative Professionals of Washington. She is a member of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals.

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Elise Buie, JD: Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans forcing the evacuation of my family. Initially we moved to rural Georgia, then to Minnesota and finally to the Pacific Northwest. After undergoing my own divorce and multiple relocations due to Hurricane Katrina, I truly understood what it meant to put the “best interest of the kids” ahead of my own. I decided to focus my practice on family law and serving as a Guardian ad Litem advocating for children’s best interests in high-conflict divorce. I pride myself on my ability to work through huge problems and major life transitions. I strive to preserve civility and respect during the divorce process. I am currently writing a 4-part series for the ABA on “Civility in Family Law.” I educate my clients on the impact of their conflict on children so they can make the best decisions for the future health of their family. I bring a breadth of experience with high-conflict families to every family I have the privilege of serving. My goal is to serve each client on an individual basis. I strive to find real-life workable solutions for the families I serve, realizing that a marriage might be over but a family still stands which needs strong parental support guided by a family-centered parenting plan.

I serve on the Board of the Washington Chapter of the AFCC (incoming President 2019) and the WSBA, CLE Committee. I am a member of the King County Collaborative Law section as well as the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals. More official stats: I received my Juris Doctorate from Loyola School of Law in 1994. While in law school, I served on the Loyola Law Review and the National Moot Court Team earning the Top Orator Award. I also served as an appellate law clerk to Judge Ward at the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans. I began my legal career as a Federal Judicial Law Clerk to the Honorable Stanwood R. Duval, Jr. of the Eastern District of Louisiana.

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