

Parenting Plan Guide.



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What is a parenting plan?

A Parenting Plan is a written plan worked out between parents (and sometimes grandparents and other family members) after they separate.

- The Plan covers practical issues of parenting.
- It asks you to think about your children and, based on their sex, ages and personalities, what they are likely to need.
- A Parenting Plan must put the best interests of the child first.
- A Parenting Plan sets out a shared commitment to your children and their future.

Why make a Parenting Plan?

- A Parenting Plan can help you in dealings with your children's other parent or carer.
- Divorce and separation are painful for everyone involved – particularly children, who need support, love and good relationships with both parents.
- Conflict between parents hurts children.
- It is very important that everyone has some certainty about the future.
- A written Parenting Plan, worked out between parents, will help clarify the arrangements you need to put in place to care for your children.
- It will help everyone involved to know what is expected of them and it will be a valuable reference as time passes and circumstances change.

What does it consist of?

Your plan will set out practical decisions about children's care in areas such as:

- communication and dealing with differences;
- living arrangements – who your child will spend time with (including other family members such as grandparents), how often and when;
- money;
- religion;
- education;
- health care; and
- emotional well-being.

What is not covered in a Parenting Plan?

A Parenting Plan does not cover how you intend to divide up your money, home and assets.



Thinking about safety

Staying Safe

It is usually best when parents develop a co-operative parenting relationship. However, situations that need special consideration include where there has been:

- domestic violence or abuse (physical, emotional, sexual or financial) towards a parent;
- physical, emotional or sexual abuse of a child;
- substance misuse issues;
- child neglect or abandonment.

Although it is important for children to maintain a loving relationship with both parents, the children's safety and their physical and emotional wellbeing should always come first.

Before going any further with the Parenting Plan you should consider the following:

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

- Any form of domestic abuse or violence
- Any actual or attempted child abduction
- Any child abuse
- The abuse of drugs, alcohol or other substance misuse
- Any other safety or welfare concerns.

If you have answered no to all of these questions, you should be able to proceed with this Plan.

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, or are not sure what any of them mean or what your answer is, you should get further help. Help is available via <https://www.advicenow.org.uk/help-deal-family-problems> and <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/making-agreements-about-your-children/>

Answering yes to any of the questions above may not necessarily be a barrier to co-operative parenting, but you may need specialist help before considering the next steps.

You may already have thought about these issues with a dispute-resolution service (for example mediation or a contact centre). If you contact a dispute-resolution service in the future, they will check these questions again with you and give you the opportunity to raise any concerns. None of these services will ask former partners to work together without being sure that it is safe, and that you both agree.



Drawing up a Parenting Plan

How do I draw up a parenting plan?

Parenting Plans can be worked out between parents:

- on their own; or
- with help from a dispute-resolution service.

You can also attend a Separated Parents Information Programme (SPIP) (see below).

The plan can be worked out:

- face-to-face;
- by telephone;
- online;
- by email.

When should I draw up a plan?

You can draw up a plan at any point. You can make the Plan in sections as you need to. It is much better to make a workable short-term plan (for example about arrangements for each parent to spend time with your children) than wait until you have a perfect Plan about everything. When you are sorting things out with the other parent or carer you can review what you have already agreed and make changes as necessary. Before you start, think about whether you are ready to make a plan.

- Can you listen to each other?
- Can you listen to your children and agree what they might need?
- Can you negotiate equally?

Separated Parents Information Programme (SPIP)

Across England there is a network of skilled, trained and experienced voluntary organisations that deliver the Separated Parents Information Programme. The programme is not about your parenting skills, but it does give you information and ideas about co-parenting and the help that is available for you. 9 out of 10 parents say they have gained a better understanding about the impact separation has to their children. They also wish they had taken part sooner even when they were reluctant to attend at first.

The programme works best if both parents attend the sessions. This is because there will be things that you each may need to know more about, and each also need to consider about the other person's view. You will always be in separate groups. The person leading the group will help you to think about possible next steps.

A group might be suggested to you by a mediation service, a relationships service or a child contact centre. There is a leaflet explaining more about SPIPs on the Cafcass website (www.cafcass.gov.uk).

Mediation

Family mediation is a very common way of settling differences during and after separation or divorce. A trained mediator will help you and the other parent or carer agree on arrangements for looking after your children.

A mediator is a qualified independent person who will not take sides or try to get you back together. Mediation can help you and the other parent or carer to agree arrangements for your children by talking things through. A mediator will not tell you what to do but can help you and the other parent or carer to make agreements that are best for your children.

A trained mediator helps you and the other person to talk about the things you cannot agree on between yourselves. The mediator will help you both see if there is any way that you could agree with each other.

Not all cases are suitable for mediation, especially if there has been violence in the relationship or there are other serious welfare concerns. The mediator will be able to help you decide if your circumstances are suitable for mediation and will not start mediation if they think it is not appropriate.

There is a fee for mediation but you may be able to get legal aid to help pay for it. For more information on legal aid, visit www.gov.uk/legal-aid. To find your nearest family mediator, visit <https://www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk/find-local-mediator/>

Help with communicating

The Skills to Get it Right for our Children: skills to manage conflict and communicate well

Being able to make effective plans relies on good communication between both parents. Thinking about these skills might help:

Stay calm:

- Relax your shoulders.
- Breathe through your diaphragm rather than shallowly through your chest.
- Take deep breaths and deliberately breathe more slowly.

Learn to listen:

- Try to focus, so your attention isn't divided.
- Take a position of curiosity: you might be surprised or wrong about what you expect to hear.
- Only listen: if you are talking it means you can't be listening – you can't do both at once!
- Take your turn to talk after you've listened: you are more likely to be listened to if you've listened well yourself.
- Leave pauses and don't jump into the other person's pauses.

Speak for yourself using "I" statements

- Phrase things in a way that is about what you think or have noted or want, not what you assume or know the other person does! For example: "I get angry when you ask me about my money in front of the children" rather than "You always try to stir things up by asking about money. You know I hate it!"

Be clear, stick to the point, stick to the rules:

- Make requests simple and clear.
- Observe simple rules of courtesy (be business-like).
- Stick to one subject.
- Think about the most important point. Stick to that point – take one thing at a time.
- Do not give in to the urge to interrupt. Take deep breaths and bite your tongue.

- Avoid speaking too soon, too often or for too long. Keep things short and simple. When there is deadlock, though you will hope that the other parent will come round, take a small time-out.
- Take a deep breath, stop, and think: what can I do about this situation?
- When you have decided what you can do, follow the rules below:
- Phrase it in 'offer form' (for example "I can check with the school for you to see if they have your new email").
- Remember to be polite and business-like.
- Make sure that you both have the background information you need and reflect on what might work for you and for your children.
- Attend a SPIP (you don't have to do this at the same time). Think about what you found useful from the SPIP and what you might do next. Let the other parent know what you are doing.
- If communication is difficult, there is online help available (<https://click.clickrelationships.org/home/parenting-apart/>) or you can talk to a mediator, or a relationship service, who may be able to help. Again, you do not both need to do this at the same time.
- This may take some time and can be quite difficult to do. Take small steps and focus on what you can do for your children. Going to court rarely improves communication and can make it worse.



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 – there are some simple but effective exercises on the previous page. 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, so take some time to think about and practise the listening skills on page 6 – 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 can 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.

It is best if parents can cooperate about listening to their child, and respond with realistic and long-term plans. However, sometimes a child needs to talk things over with someone else, especially if there are court proceedings over him or her. Mediators, Cafcass workers reporting to courts, and the courts themselves will want to make sure that they understand and can represent the wishes and feelings of your child – as well as make sure safety and protection issues are in place.

Children and mediation

Including children and young people directly in mediation makes sure that the parents listen to the child when making decisions. While many children want to take part in mediation, others do not want to talk to someone outside the family, so taking part is always voluntary. Mediators and practitioners who are skilled in talking with children can give a child the opportunity to speak with an independent person so that they can

express their thoughts and feel that they have been listened to. You can find mediators who currently offer this by going to www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk. Not all mediators offer children the opportunity to take part directly at the moment, but all mediators will help parents to talk with and listen to their children so that parents can make decisions which are the best for each child.

Cafcass' role

Cafcass workers do not meet all children because sometimes families can sort things out on their own. If the court has asked Cafcass to produce a report, a Cafcass worker will nearly always talk to your child (depending on their age and understanding) about their wishes and feelings and what they would like to happen. The Cafcass worker will not ask your child to make a decision or choose between you and the other parent. The Cafcass worker will usually talk to your child alone. There is more information on the Cafcass website www.cafcass.gov.uk/leaflets-resources/our-work-with-children.aspx.

Children and the family courts

Sometimes it is appropriate for a child to communicate their views directly to court, and a Cafcass worker can help with this. The leaflet 'CB7 Guide for separated parents: children and the family courts' <https://deedpoll.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CB7.pdf> also provides information about children's communication with the court.

If it is necessary for someone else to listen to your child it is important that you encourage your child to express their own (not your) views. There is information that might help your child express their views that you can find here, alongside general useful links for co-parenting <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/grown-ups/parents-and-carers/resources-parents-carers/>

However, you need to take care that your child does not get caught in the middle or feel pressured into taking sides. This can be very upsetting for children and can damage their relationship with both parents (and can very often be obvious to professionals working with you).

Helpful tips to avoid 'coaching' or pressuring a child:

- Make sure that you understand your feelings and have been able to set them to one side (be emotionally ready) before talking to your child – see above.
- Make sure that your child knows that both parents are listening, and are talking to each other about what they are hearing.

[Download your own Parenting Plan template here.](#)



All information sourced from Cafcass
(Published December 2015. ISBN 117082457)
www.cafcass.gov.uk



www.stowefamilylaw.co.uk