

Parents' guide to making
plans for their children
after separation

New Zealand Family Courts

Parenting Plans





Put yourself
in your
children's shoes
and ask what's
really best for
them



What arrangements do we need to make for our children?

After you have separated, you both continue to be responsible for your children. Together you will have to sort out how to organise your children's day to day care.

If only one of you is going to have regular day to day care, then you will have to agree on the ways your children are going to keep in contact with their other parent.

Who should decide on the arrangements?

It's best for everyone, especially your children, if you agree on the arrangements yourselves. You know your children's needs and what will work best for them.

What if I'm worried about my child's safety or my safety?

If there are safety issues you are concerned about (e.g. violence, abuse, drug or alcohol dependency), the safety of you and your children always comes first. Get advice as soon as possible from a lawyer or the Family Court Co-ordinator at your local Family Court.





How can this booklet help?

This booklet lets you know what you need to think about when you are making arrangements for your children. It includes a guide parenting plan which you can either use by filling in the blanks, or as a checklist if you want to make your own version.

You should also have a look at the booklet 'Putting your Children First - Parents' Guide to Caring for Children after Separation' which you can get from the Family Court or www.justice.govt.nz/family

It's best if...

- children can keep up a loving relationship with both parents as much as possible
- children keep up their relationships with extended family and whanau, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins and also their friends on both sides of the family (even if you don't keep in contact yourself)
- children have as few changes as possible, especially at first

We want
to have lots
of time with
both of you

We don't
want to see
you fight
or argue





Plans need to suit the ages of your children

The best arrangements for children vary according to their age, gender, personality and family circumstances.

Parents often have different parenting strengths – think about these when dividing up responsibilities.

Listening to your children

If your children are old enough, encourage them to say what arrangements are important to them. Don't put them under any pressure to choose between you. Respect what they say, but don't make them feel it's their responsibility to sort it out – that's your job.

There are many ways of organising things

Children want to share their time with both of you and most say they want it to be fair. Use the parenting plan in this booklet to help you organise arrangements for your children.

It is easier to organise things, and best for the children, if both parents can continue to live in the same area as before they separated. That way children have fewer changes to adapt to and there's less travel.



I like it
when you
came to my
School concerts



Making arrangements for your...

babies and pre-schoolers (birth to 5 years)

Time is experienced very differently for this age group. A few days seems like a long time.

Little children shouldn't be away from either of you for more than a few days at a time if they're going to be able to love and trust you both.

Short visits at least 3 or 4 times a week are a good idea, doing routine things like feeding, playing, bathing, going for a walk and putting to bed. Even babies and toddlers can usually have an overnight visit with a parent when they're used to being cared for by them – as long as their routine is kept up.

If you haven't been involved much with the children before or after the separation, you'll have to build up time and closeness with them gradually. Parenting courses may also help you learn new parenting skills.

Toddlers and older pre-schoolers often get clingy and upset at changeovers because this age group can be frightened of separations. So, changeovers need to be handled patiently and carefully, with as little tension as possible between parents. It can be easier for one parent to drop children off for their visit rather than for the other parent to take them away.

If another caregiver is involved as well (e.g. grandparent, extended whanau or day care), you'll need to watch out for signs that there are too many changeovers going on.

We want to
have a say,
but we don't
want to
have to choose

school aged children (5 – 11 years)

School aged children are more used to separating, e.g. when they go to school, visit friends and family or whanau.

If both parents have been involved in parenting, then it can work well for some children to split their time up more or less equally between two homes.

Others prefer one home base with regular, frequent overnight visits midweek as well as at the weekends.



teenagers (12 years and up)

It's usual for teenagers to want to have a say in how they spend their time with each parent.

Teenagers need more flexibility and a different kind of parenting as they start to develop their own independent lives. Parents need to take their teenagers' school, social and other commitments and activities into account, as well as their need for time to relax.

Teenagers who have split their time up equally between their parents in the past might now prefer to have just one home base. Both parents can increase time with them, for example, by going along to their school and sports activities.

Arrangements for contact

If only one parent is to have day to day care of the children, it's important to work out together how your children are going to stay in contact with their other parent.

Remember about the possibilities for extra contact with phone calls, texting or e-mail communication.

What do we do when we've agreed?

Write everything down so there's less chance of a misunderstanding later on. Use the guide parenting plan in this booklet or write up your own.

When you have both signed the parenting plan this becomes your parenting agreement. You should both keep a copy.





If you want to, you can apply to the Family Court to have your parenting plan made into a court order called a parenting order. For more information on this see the Parenting Agreement pamphlet available from the Family Court or the Family Court website www.justice.govt.nz/family



What if we can't agree?

If you are having difficulty agreeing, make it a rule to focus only on the arrangements for your children. Relationship and money/property issues need to be dealt with separately from parenting.

Try the communication tips for parents in the booklet *Putting Your Children First*.

If you are still having difficulty, you can ask the Family Court to help by arranging free counselling. A counsellor is a neutral person trained to help parents understand and deal with the things which can get in the way of reaching agreement. You can arrange your own counselling if you prefer, but you will have to pay for this yourselves.

Can we change a parenting plan?

You and your partner can agree to review and change the parenting plan at any time to meet the changing needs of your children.

Reviews should be carried out about every year or whenever your children reach a new stage. But if it's been really hard for you to reach agreement and it's working it may be best to review it less often.





If you want more information or advice

For more information or advice about parenting agreements and parenting orders, look on the Family Court website – www.justice.govt.nz/family or contact a family lawyer – www.familylaw.org.nz, a community law centre, or the nearest Family Court office.

The Ministry of Justice offers a free information programme to help you understand the impact of separation on your children and help you make arrangements for the care of your children following separation. To find out more about how this programme can help you and your children, visit www.justice.govt.nz/family or call 0800 211 211. The helpline can put you through to a programme provider in your area.

What if somebody doesn't stick to the parenting plan?

You should both stick to your parenting plan as closely as you can but give each other reasonable flexibility for unavoidable circumstances.

A parenting plan cannot be legally enforced unless it is made into a court order.

The Family Court will help you work out any problems over your parenting plan by arranging free counselling for you. If this doesn't work, you can apply to the court for a parenting order. The Court will try to help you reach agreement but if this is not possible a parenting order can be made by a Family Court Judge.

If a parent doesn't follow a parenting order, the Family Court has a range of options to make sure its orders are complied with.



we want

- things to be fair
- not to be put in the middle
- to be asked our views
- to have lots of time with both of you
- to have fun
- to be loved
- not to see you fight or argue
- not to hear you criticise each other

parenting plan for

Name of children here

date



11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10	10-10-10



Sophie's hair age 2

Helpful Tips

- Focus on your children's needs, not your relationship issues
- don't use your children to carry messages
- meet in a public or neutral place
- don't discuss things that might end in an argument in front of the kids
- if face to face or phone contact is difficult try email or text messages

Making a Parenting Plan

Steps

- 1 Go through the parenting plan and agree on what arrangements work best for your children
- 2 Write it down
- 3 Keep a copy for each of you
- 4 Get help from a counsellor or the Family Court if you're having trouble agreeing
- 5 Do your best to make it work for your children

Living arrangements

👤 How will the children spend time with each of you?



To help you get started

An easy way to get started is to make a weekly or monthly calendar showing how the arrangements all fit together. At the back of this book is a blank weekly and monthly calendar you can use.

Weekly plan

A weekly plan for a pre-school child might look something like this:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
8.00							
9.00							
10.00							
11.00							
12 pm							
1.00pm							
2.00							
3.00							
4.00							
5.00							
6.00							
7.00							
8.00							
overnight							

The shaded times are with Parent A - all day Monday and Monday night, 4pm to 7pm Wednesday, all day Friday and Friday night, Saturday morning.

Blank is time with parent B - all other times.

Monthly plan

A monthly plan for a school-aged child might look something like this:

Week	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
1							
2							
3							
4							

The shaded times are with Parent A - 9am Sundays to 8am Wednesdays (before school).
The rest of the time is with Parent B - Wednesdays after school to 9am Sundays.

Monthly plans may be more useful for older children.

When discussing things...
AVOID 'you' statements
which tend to blame or
accuse
"you never pack the
right clothes for Josh..."

USE 'I' statements and
make it positive
"I'd really like it if you
packed Josh's track
pants because ..."



Contact arrangements

When the children are staying with one of you, what contact will they have with the other?

When will the children spend time with other important family, whanau and friends?



Changeovers

👉 How will the children get from one household to the other?

👉 Will changeovers sometimes take place at school (for example one parent drops off child at school in the morning, the other parent picks up child from school in the afternoon) and on what days?

How will we deal with special occasions

- 👉 Birthdays (children's and parents')



- 👉 Mothers' Day

- 👉 Fathers' Day

- 👉 Long weekends/other public holidays

- 👉 Christmas/other festivals



Safety Rules

👉 Supervision at home – are the children ever allowed to be at home on their own?

👉 Supervision away from home – are the children ever allowed to walk/catch public transport on their own? In what circumstances?

👉 Other concerns



Who else is allowed to look after the children?

👉 E.g. babysitters, relatives, child-care centres, after-school care?



**What happens if one of us isn't available
to look after the children during our
scheduled time?**



Health

- When and how will we communicate with each other if the children are sick?
- How will we share responsibility for looking after the children when they are sick/unable to go to school?
- How will we share responsibility for taking the children to medical/dental appointments?

- Do we agree that our children should be immunised?



School

Will the children be able to stay at the same school?



Who will tell school that the children's family circumstances have changed?

Who will go to parents' evenings and other school events?



👉 When the children get older and the time comes for a change of school how will this be agreed on?

👉 Can the children receive religious instruction at school?

👉 Can the children receive sex education at school?

👉 How are decisions going to be made about choosing course subjects?



👉 How will we know about progress at school and who will tell the school that reports and notices need to be sent to both of us?

👉 Who will look after the children during teacher only days and other short school days?

After school activities

👉 Who will take responsibility for getting the children to these?



Who will go to school camps?

Holidays

Who will the children spend their holiday time with and who will make any travel arrangements?



Special cultural and religious matters



Special medical or health matters

**When will we have regular discussions
about the children?**

Who will look after the children's important documents?

Money checklist

If you can't agree on anything in this checklist, don't let it get in the way of finalising the other arrangements first. You can come back to these things later on. Just write in: 'to be agreed later'.

- Are either of us making regular payments for the children to the other?
(these can include payments through Inland Revenue Child Support)

- How are we going to pay for everyday clothes and shoes?

- How will we pay for the children's outside-school activities
(eg sport, church camps, music, dancing)?



- How are we going to pay for other school expenses (e.g. fees, donations, transport, trips, stationery)?

I like it when
you come to
watch me
dance



- How are we going to pay for medical expenses (doctor's fees, dentist, optician)?

- How are we going to pay for childcare?

- How are we going to pay for school uniforms, clothes, shoes, sports and activities at school?

love your children and have fun with them

👉 How are we going to pay for holidays and travel (e.g. visits to grandparents, whanau and friends)?

👉 How are we going to pay for large items (e.g. bicycle, cell phone, computer)?

👉 Are either of us going to give our children pocket money and how much?

How will we make sure this plan is kept up to date for the children?



Weekly schedule

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
8.00							
9.00							
10.00							
11.00							
12 pm							
1.00pm							
2.00							
3.00							
4.00							
5.00							
6.00							
7.00							
8.00							
overnight							

Monthly schedule

Week	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
1							
2							
3							
4							

Notes and Contact numbers



PARENTS'/CAREGIVERS' COMMITMENT

We understand that we are still both joint guardians of our children even though we've separated. We accept that this means that we are both responsible for major decisions about their future, such as their education, religion, where they live, their name and overseas travel. We will work out decisions about these things together, as co-operatively as we can, until they are adults.

We accept that the responsibility to make the day to day decisions for our children will have to be taken by whoever they are staying with at the time.

We have both read and understood the arrangements for the children recorded in this Parenting Plan and will follow it as closely as we can until we make another agreement together.

Signed

Signed

Date





