

Helping Your Children Cope With Family Change



Presented by
Multnomah County Family Court Services
Clackamas County Resolution Services

“Winning is never more important than the well-being of your *children*”

Marc Ackerman: *“Does Wednesday Mean Mom’s House or Dad’s?”*





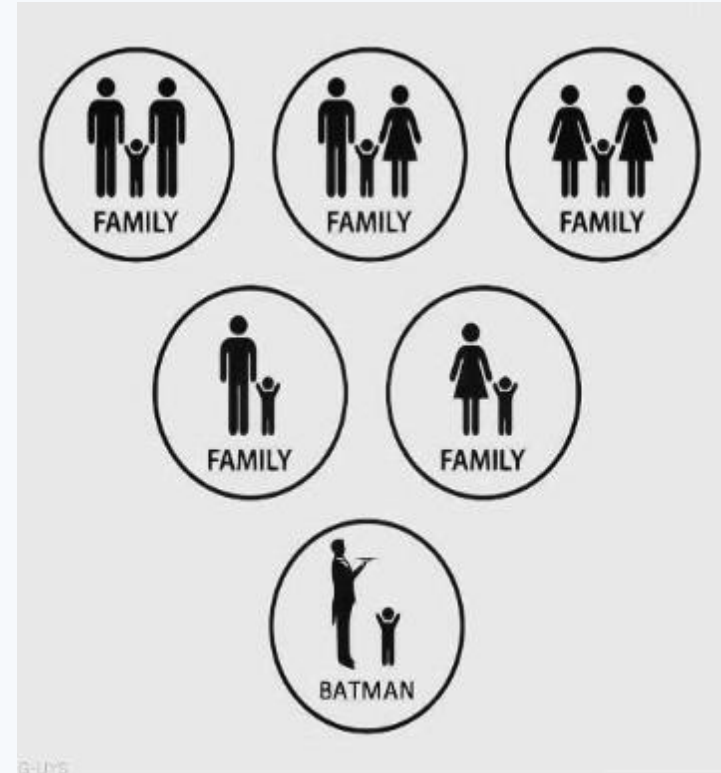
- **Beginning with the Background**
- **Hearing from the “Experts”**
- **Understanding the Separation Process**
- **Preparing for Legal Decisions**
- **Helping Your Child Adjust**

Beginning with the Background



Families Are Diverse.....

- Today, nearly 50% of parents are not married.
- One in six children live in a blended family (with a stepparent, stepsibling or half-sibling)
- Many parents are parenting solo
- Twice as many households are multigenerational now than in 1980
- About 7% of children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives
- About 16% of all same sex couples in the US are raising children together.



You Are Not Alone

- Half of all marriages and two thirds of 2nd marriages end in divorce
- Today, the average length of a first marriage is about 8 years compared to 25 years in 1970.
- Over 1 million children are impacted by divorce every year (14,000 OR children)
- 70% of all children in the US will spend time in a single parent household



Some Realities About Separation/Divorce for Parents

- Increased financial stress
- Both parents have less time with children
- Holidays, vacations and family time changes
- New partners may have an impact

Parenting *will* change

What You Should Know About Domestic Violence

- The risk of violence *increases* during the separation process
- Children exposed to domestic violence are at risk to:
 - Experience higher levels of anger, anxiety, depression, and school & behavior problems now and in the future
 - Be in violent relationships as adults
 - Are at risk for changes in brain development



If Violence is an Issue in Your Family, Consider...

- Seeking additional legal and emotional support for you and your children
- Making safety *a number one* priority
- Discussing safe ways to problem solve and co-parent:
 - ✓ Ask the Court to waive mediation or meet in separate rooms (shuttle mediation)Secure escort for Court proceedings
 - ✓ Supervised parenting time or supervised exchanges
 - ✓ Domestic violence intervention services



Safety Resources:

*If you have concerns about your safety
or your children's safety:*

- In Multnomah County, contact the Gateway Center – 503–988–6400 – 10305 E Burnside St., Portland, OR 97216
- In Clackamas County, contact A Safe Place – 503–655–8600, 256 Warner Milne Rd., Oregon City, OR 97045
- See page 80 in your booklet for referral information

Research Tells Us What Hurts Children

- Exposure to ***chronic parental conflict***: seeing, hearing, or being told about you fighting with each other
- ***Loyalty Binds***: *bad-mouthing of the other parent, being made to feel they have to choose sides*
- ***Loss of a parental contact***: *1/3 of all children lose contact with one of their parents after a divorce or break up*
 - *Frequent contact with **safe and supportive** parents improves school performance and decreases risk of delinquency, low self esteem and early pregnancy.*



Research Also Tells Us Children Do Well When They...

- Are supported by both parents
- Have parents that model:
 - Rebuilding their lives
 - Managing conflict constructively
- Are connected to outside support
- Have strong inner resources

You are loved, valuable, special, wanted, accepted, great, important...

The Parent's Job Is to Be the Adult By...

- Keeping conflict away from children
- Avoiding bad-mouthing the other parent
- Working to support the involvement of the other parent if they are available & safe



Listening to the Experts





VIDEOTIME

Good News

You *CAN* still be a supportive parent, even though the intimate relationship with the other parent has ended.



- ▶ Most children adjust well to the new family situation sooner or later
- ▶ You *can* help your children thrive
- ▶ There are lots of resources for parents and children who want help



Understanding the Divorce and Separation Process



The Grieving Process

Children may experience many feelings ...

- Sadness
- Denial
- Anxiety/Fear
- Anger
- Relief
- Stress
- Depression
- Confusion
- Acceptance/Understanding



You may be feeling some of these things too, and not always at the same time or in the same way as your children...

Supporting Your Children Through Family Change

- Let your children know that whatever they feel is okay
- Help your children *label* their feelings with words – *labeling feelings actually calms down the emotional centers of the brain (Lieberman, et al., May 2007)*
- Children need:
 - Comfort
 - Age appropriate answers.
 - Guidance and skills for handling anger.
 - Reassurance & regular routines.
 - Relief and access to fun activities.

You and Your Children May Have Reactions...

- When you or the other parent remarries, re-couples or divorces again
- At graduations, marriages and anniversaries
- When you or the other parent has a child with a new partner
- When change, or threat of change, occur in legal arrangements
- When children's needs change



Take Care of Yourself for Your Children's Sake

- Find healthy ways to manage your stress – ask for help, get counseling or support
- Go slowly when considering long-term legal decisions... one step at a time
- Create a plan and structure for interactions with other parent
- Care for your physical and mental health and well-being.



New Partners.....what to do ?

- ▶ Go *SLOW* with introductions if you want your children to accept a new partner
- ▶ Prepare the other parent *before* children are introduced to a new partner
- ▶ Expect children to take time (*2 years is normal*) to adjust to a new partner
- ▶ Focus on your children's perspective and needs and *listen* to their concerns – children still need one on one time with you!



Legal Terms and Problem Solving



Legal Custody

Legal Custody = Decision-making about major issues including non-emergency medical care, education, and religion and residence.

Options in Oregon:

Joint Custody – parents agree to share custodial decisions

Sole Custody – parents may consult, but one parent has final decision-making authority in the specified areas

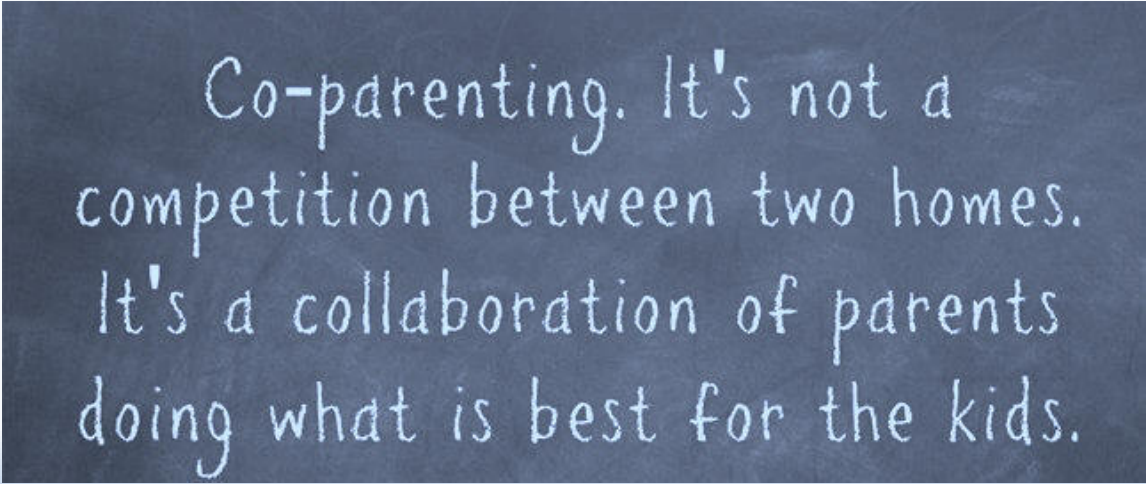
(A Judge cannot order joint custody over the objection of a parent)



The Parenting Plan

Oregon law requires parents to make a plan for sharing time and care of children unless there are documented safety issues.

Parenting Plans should reflect the age, development, and unique needs of children.



Co-parenting. It's not a competition between two homes. It's a collaboration of parents doing what is best for the kids.

Parenting Plans typically include:

- Parenting time schedule
 - Regular, weekend & summer schedules
 - Holiday, Birthday & vacation schedules
- Legal Custody & Child's residence
- Methods for Communication & Conflict Resolution
- Other Issues Important to Parents
- Sample parenting plans available at:

<https://www.courts.oregon.gov/programs/family/children/pages/parenting-plan-guide.aspx>

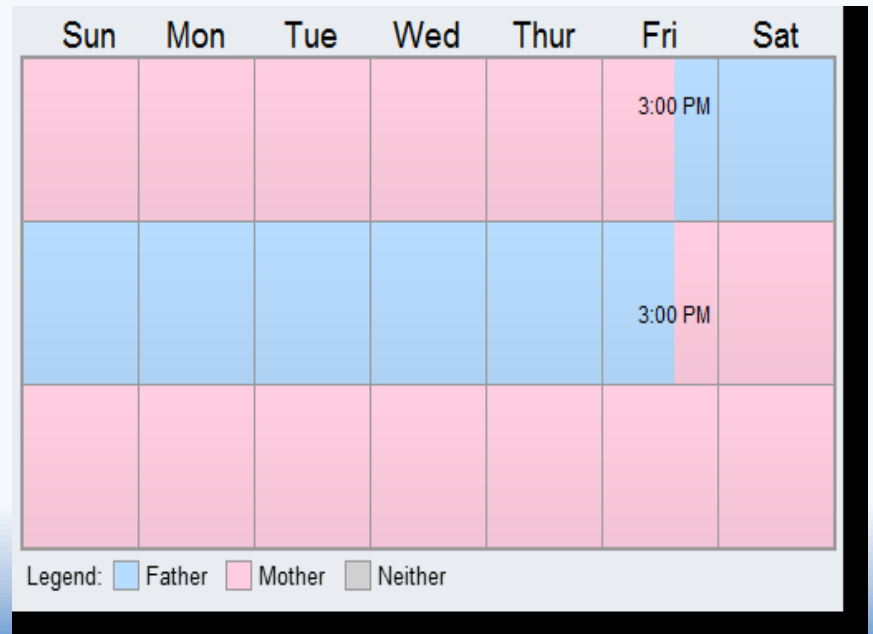


Samples of Parenting Schedule



50% - 50%

30% - 70%



Parenting Plan Safety Considerations:

- Child abuse or neglect
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Domestic violence
- Power imbalances
- Untreated, severe mental illness that negatively effects child



Parents' Rights to Information

Each parent has the right to access the following information about his/her child:

- Health & Mental Health Treatment
- Education/School Records
- Juvenile Justice Records

...regardless of custody (unless a judge has specifically ordered otherwise).

(Oregon Revised Statutes 107.154)

Shared Parenting

- Shared parenting refers to any arrangement of parenting time over 35% and up to 50%.

Research shows that shared parenting works best when:

- ▶ Parents choose shared care voluntarily
- ▶ Both parents provide warm, responsive parenting
- ▶ Violence, substance abuse or mental illness is not a factor
- ▶ Conflict levels are low
- ▶ Parents live close to each other and can exchange the child with few problems
- ▶ Children are older and can handle two homes



Choices for Conflict Resolution

Talk: Informal, parents control decisions, builds co-parent relationship, free

Mediate: Supported negotiation, parents control decisions, builds conflict resolution skills, **free or low cost**

Collaborate: Collaborative attorneys (one representing each parent) works with both parents to reach agreements, often bringing in a team of consultants to assist; **parents control most decisions**

Attorney Settlement: Attorney for each parent negotiates on behalf of parent, less control of message and decisions, can be adversarial and damage co-parent relationship, costly

Many people resolve their case without ever using attorneys

Trial: Formal, parents have little control, adversarial, can damage co-parent relationship; costly.

Most people (over 95%) resolve their case without a trial

Realities of Court

Reasons to Stay out of Court:

High Costs

Antagonism

Harm to children

Long delays

Overloaded calendars

Wrong decisions

Lying witnesses

Disgruntled judges

*Most importantly, parents
lose control over decisions
about their children*

*From: A Judge's Guide to Divorce:
Uncommon Advice from the Bench by
Judge Roderic Duncan*



Why Mediation Works

When parents at least tried mediation...

- Non-residential parents were **3 times** more likely to have weekly contact with their children

Parents were **5 times less** likely to go back to court

- Non-residential parents had significantly more influence on residential parents' decisions
- Children were **twice** as likely to know when their next visit would occur

(Emery, 2001)

Child Support

- ▶ Designed to balance resources between households for the *benefit of the child*
- ▶ Meant to cover basics: *shelter, food and clothing*
- ▶ Determined by a formula set by the Oregon Dept. of Justice
- ▶ *Other expenses like sports, summer camp, tutoring, counseling, etc. should be negotiated between parents*



Helping Children Adjust

During Divorce/Separation All Children Need:

- Adequate and Appropriate Information
- To know that they don't have to choose between their parents – they can love you both
- Consistent, Predictable Routines & Structure
- Emotional Support & Nurturance
- Realistic Expectations

*Kids' needs don't change ---
The way we provide for those needs is what changes* 36

Normal Reactions & Signs of Distress

Normal reactions can include:

- ▶ Some clinginess/separation anxiety
- ▶ Interruption in developmental milestones
- ▶ Wanting to sleep with a parent or not be alone
- ▶ Increased worries or fears
- ▶ Shyness or avoidance in social situations
- ▶ Changes in school performance or not wanting to go to school

Signs of Distress:

- ▶ Child cannot be comforted after separating from a parent
- ▶ Regression (*going back to old behavior*) is significant and lasts longer than six months
- ▶ Extreme anxiety – multiple fears, nightmares, child cannot tolerate being alone
- ▶ Signs of serious depression; withdrawal, sadness, sleep problems, loss of interest, etc.
- ▶ Significant school problems or school failure

Immediate Response is Necessary if you:

- ▶ Observe sexualized behavior or suspect sexual abuse.
- ▶ Suspect or witness self-harm/self-mutilation.
- ▶ Observe your child is talking about, thinking or attempting suicide
- ▶ Suspect there is an eating disorder
- ▶ Suspect or witness drug/alcohol abuse
- ▶ There is school failure
- ▶ Physical aggression
- ▶ Extreme withdrawal

Attachment is Important!

- ▶ It is a *fundamental building block* for healthy growth and development
- ▶ It is established in the first years of life by sensitive, responsive care-giving
- ▶ It Creates *Trust* – Children learn they can get what they need and be secure with others
- ▶ It is linked to good self esteem, school success, ability to handle change and healthy relationships with others



Developmental Stages

Possible Challenges and Suggestions



Infancy – 18 months “Attachment and Trust”

Possible Challenges

- ⌄ Disruption in routines: feeding, sleeping, toileting
- ⌄ Disruptions in attachment relationship with primary caregiver
- ⌄ Highly sensitive to parent’s emotional state
- ⌄ The need for frequent and detailed communication @ naps, meals, medications...

Suggestions

- Maintain routines & match in both homes, daycare etc. when possible
- Support primary attachment and provide frequent contact with non-residential parent to develop & strengthen attachment
- Monitor strong feelings around infant – *Get Support*
- Use email, notebook/journal, telephone or website to keep each other informed about child’s status

18 Months to 3 Years “Independence & Autonomy”

Possible Challenges

Suggestions

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| ◆ Need to explore the environment | → | Provide constant supervision and stimulating environments |
| ◆ Testing limits: saying “no” and having tantrums | → | Provide structure, consistency and routines; encourage using words to get needs met |
| ◆ More anxiety during transitions and separation, clinging and whining. | → | Provide warm, responsive care; lower the “voltage” of transitions; maintain existing childcare providers |
| ◆ Parents must have frequent and detailed communication : naps, meals, meds... | → | Use email, notebook, journal, telephone or website to keep each other informed about child’s status |

Parenting Time Schedules for Children Under Age 3 Should...

- ▶ Support attachment to primary caregivers
- ▶ Minimize exposure to parental conflict and tension
- ▶ Try to accommodate feeding and sleep schedules
- ▶ Create opportunities for the other parent to build attachment through:
 - Frequent and consistent contact
 - Providing care: feeding, changing, playing and nap time
- ▶ Include ways to communicate important information about the health and status of the child



Overnights for Young Children

Things to Consider...

- ▶ **Parenting History & Pre-separation Roles:** *What did you do before? Avoid abrupt changes.*
- ▶ **Attachment History:** *Who has provided primary care? What is the child's level of attachment to each of you?*
- ▶ **Parenting Ability and Skill Set:** *What is each parent's ability to soothe, comfort and provide basic care to the child?*
- ▶ **Child's Temperament:** *How does your child handle new environments, transitions and time away from a primary caregiver?*
- ▶ **Quality of the Parent to Parent Relationship:** *Can you and the other parent communicate about important care details? Can you exchange the child without conflict?*



3 – 5 Years

“Socialization and Self-Regulation”

Possible Challenges

- ⋄ Fears of abandonment or loss of a parent
- ⋄ Feelings of guilt, confusion and responsibility
- ⋄ Re-unification fantasies
- ⋄ Behavior problems: regression, heightened aggression, acting perfect, whining, clinging & sadness

Suggestions

- Reassure children of parent’s return; use reminders at each home; Encourage parental involvement
- Parents tell children about family change together (*See Booklet pg. 29*)
- Use age appropriate books & materials to give realistic information & expectations about divorce/separation
- Maintain consistent discipline, routines and nurturing activities

6 – 8 Years

“Empathy and Competence”

Possible Challenges

- ❖ Loyalty conflicts
- ❖ Sadness, longing for absent parent, asking for reconciliation
- ❖ Behavior problems: crying, anger, tantrums
- ❖ School performance problems
- ❖ Physical complaints: tummy aches, headaches, etc.

Suggestions

- Shield from parental hostilities
- Regular/frequent time with each parent
- Consistent discipline and nurturing activities
- Regular school attendance; also inform school about divorce; get support for child in school, tutor, school counseling, etc.
- Provide emotional support; encourage talking about feelings, get counseling

Parenting Time Schedules for Pre-school & Elementary Aged Children Should...

- ▶ Be predictable and regular, with clear transition routines
- ▶ Include ways to communicate important information about the health and status of the child
- ▶ Allow for frequent contact but begin to reduce the number of transitions
- ▶ Support crucial family life routines: mealtimes, bedtimes, holiday rituals
- ▶ Support educational and school activity and involvement
- ▶ Support extended family relationships
- ▶ Minimize exposure to conflict



9 - 11 Years

“Defining Sense of Self”

Possible Challenges

⇅ Hostile toward one or both parents; need to affix blame

⇅ Worry about custody

⇅ Conflicting loyalties

⇅ Shame, rejection, resentment, loneliness

⇅ Problems in school

Suggestions

→ Avoid blaming each other, encourage appropriate verbal expression of feelings

→ Provide information about the plan, NOT the conflict

→ Avoid power struggles with the other parent; reassure child they can love you both

→ Maintain routines, structure and support; talk to kids about their worries; connect them with peer support

→ Involve both parents; get school support systems engaged; support positive extracurricular activities

Parenting Time Schedules for 9–11 Year Olds Should...

- ▶ Support educational and school activities and involvement
- ▶ Support developing talents, interests and extracurricular activities – *this is a stage of high learning potential because of important brain growth that is occurring*
- ▶ Accommodate the child's ability to be away from a parent for longer periods of time
- ▶ Support the child's growing need for contact with peers and family relationships outside the home
- ▶ Minimize exposure to conflict and loyalty binds



Adolescents: *“Separation and Survival”*

Possible Challenges

- ▶ Feeling responsible for family members
- ▶ Concern about loss of family and their future
- ▶ Anger and hostility
- ▶ Acting out emotional distress through delinquency, drug use, immature or overly mature behavior

Suggestions

- Maintain parental role with child
- Limit involvement in parental worries
- Encourage positive peer support and appropriate expression of feelings
- Maintain consistent discipline; communicate about child’s schedule; talk with your child about high risk behavior; drugs, alcohol, self harm

Parenting Time Schedules for Adolescents Should...

- ▶ Support educational and school activities and involvement
- ▶ Take teens wishes into consideration, but not let them dictate the schedule – *In Oregon, children cannot legally choose where they live until they are 18 years old*
- ▶ Ensure continued contact with both parents even when teens act as though they couldn't care less – *children this age need parents as much as ever*
- ▶ Support teens growing need for independence while maintaining important family rituals and traditions
- ▶ Minimize exposure to conflict and loyalty binds – **don't make your teen your confidante**



Families Develop Over Time

- ▶ Families with young children tend to *focus in* on the family and care routines
- ▶ Families with school-aged children begin to *focus out* on school, skill development, and social activities with other families
- ▶ Families with teens are supporting their children in *developing autonomy* through increased choices, activities, and social connections to others
- ▶ Families with older teens are focused on helping children prepare for *independence* by teaching life skills, planning for independent living or schooling, and beginning to let go of parental controls



Each developmental stage requires co-parents to adjust and re-negotiate plans, schedules, & communication routines

Closing Thoughts...

- ▶ *Protect your children* from conflicts & loyalty binds
- ▶ *Maintain a meaningful presence* in your children's lives regardless of how much time you have
- ▶ *Stay in control of decisions* by finding ways to problem-solve and deal with conflicts together
- ▶ *Take the long view*; your relationship with your children will outlast parenting plans, child support and your feelings about the other parent
- ▶ *Get support* so that you can support and help your children

My Two Homes

by Amanda, age 12

Most people have one home,
but I have two.

One of my homes is with my
Mom.

My other home is with my
Dad.

I know they love me.
That's why I like having
My two homes.



From [Broken Hearts ... Healing: Young Poets Speak Out on Divorce](#), edited by Tom Worthen, Ph.D.