

Instructions and Assessments
For Your
PARENTING PLAN
A Planning Guide for Parents Living Apart
One size does not fit all!

INTRODUCTION

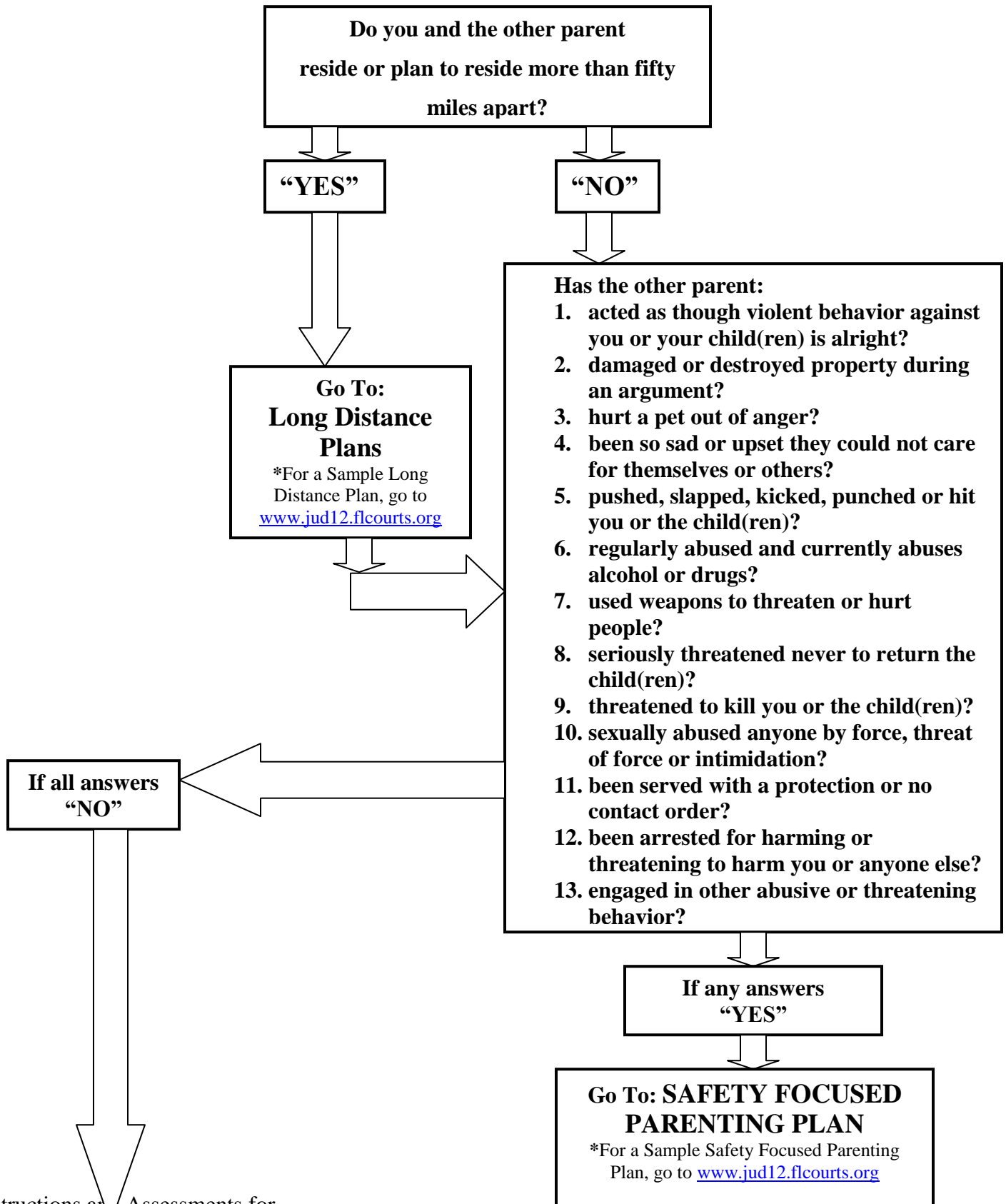
One of the most difficult challenges facing parents at the time of separation is deciding how they will address issues concerning their children. Each family is different. However, putting the best interest of our children first must come first. Parents often fear that the end of their adult relationship means an end of their child-parent relationship. **THIS IS NOT TRUE.** Parents often do not know that conflict hurts children. **THIS IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE.** Therefore, parents who are concerned about how their separation will affect their children's healthy development are already ahead of the curve.

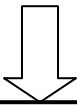
HONESTLY RECOGNIZING YOUR FAMILY'S SITUATION AND
YOUR ABSOLUTE RESPONSIBILITY TO ALWAYS SERVE YOUR
CHILDREN'S "BEST INTEREST" IS KEY FOR DEVELOPING A
PARENTING PLAN WHICH WILL WORK FOR YOU.

It is not the purpose of this guide to establish a single standard or even an "ideal" parenting arrangement. Likewise, it is beyond the ability of this guide to offer "customized" recommendations for every family. This information is intended to make you think, reflect, discuss, plan and to help you develop a parenting plan for your children's healthy future. **This assessment is just a tool and is not intended to be used as evidence in court.**

Although this booklet is intended primarily as a guide to parents at the original time of separation or filing of court action, it should continue to serve as a reference as your children grow and your situations change. Parents are encouraged to review their parenting plans as their children reach new developmental stages; as well as, when significant events such as remarriage and relocation are planned.

**QUICK VIEW CHART:
WHICH PARENTING PLAN IS RIGHT
FOR MY FAMILY?**





1. **I only communicate with my child(ren)'s other parent by: using email; certified U.S. mail; a third party (lawyer, relative, faith based professional etc.); our child(ren).** (Please don't answer yes if this is caused solely by living far apart).
2. **I do not believe my child(ren)'s other parent is a good parent.**
3. **I do not trust my child(ren)'s other parent to consistently use good judgment and make good decisions regarding our child.**
4. **I keep written and/or recorded records of all contact between myself and my child(ren)'s other parent.**
5. **I feel it is okay to make all major decisions about my child(ren) without consulting the other parent, because I have our child(ren)'s best interest at heart.**
6. **My child(ren)'s other parent and I can only exchange our child(ren): in a public setting; with an adult third party present; with the police present; and/or, by maintaining a safe physical distance.**
7. **Because of my child(ren)'s other parent's actions, I have serious concerns regarding our child(ren)'s emotional and psychological functioning; peer or social relations; mother/child(ren) relationship; father/child(ren) relationship; school performance; behavior; and/or physical health.**

**If any answers
"YES"**

**Go To: HIGHLY STRUCTURED
PARENTING PLANS**

*For a Sample Highly Structured Plan, go to
www.jud12.flcourts.org

**If all answers
"NO"**

**Go To: BASIC
PARENTING PLANS**
See the link on this website, under
Parenting Plans for a sample Basic Plan

Designing the Plan...

YOU NEED TO **HONESTLY** ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW TO SERVE THE "BEST INTEREST" OF YOUR CHILDREN.

REMEMBER YOU MAY NEED TO PROVE YOUR ANSWERS IN COURT.

STEP ONE: FAMILY ASSESSMENT

Has the other parent:

1. acted as though violent behavior against you or your child(ren) is all right?
2. damaged or destroyed property during an argument?
3. hurt a pet out of anger?
4. been so sad or upset they could not care for themselves or others?
5. pushed, slapped, kicked, punched or hit you or the child(ren)?
6. regularly abused and currently abuses alcohol and/or drugs?
7. used weapons to threaten or hurt people?
8. threatened to never return the child(ren)?
9. threatened to kill you or the child(ren)?
10. sexually abused anyone by force, threat of force or intimidation?
11. been served with a protection or no contact order?
12. been arrested for harming or threatening to harm you or anyone else?
13. engaged in any other abusive or threatening behavior?

NOTE: *the taping or recording of others without their consent is usually illegal.*

If you answered "YES" to one or more of the above questions, you may need a Safety Focused Plan. For a Sample plan, go to www.jud12.flcourts.org

If you answered "NO" to all the above questions, please continue.

STEP TWO: HIGHLY STRUCTURED ASSESSMENT

1. I only communicate with my child's other parent by: using email; certified U.S. mail; a third party (lawyer, relative, faith based professional etc.); our child(ren). (Please don't answer yes if this is caused solely by living far apart).
2. I do not believe my child(ren)'s other parent is a good parent.
3. I do not trust my child(ren)'s other parent to consistently use good judgment and make good decisions regarding our child.
4. I keep written and/or recorded records of all contact between myself and my child(ren)'s other parent.
5. I feel it is okay to make all major decisions about my child(ren) without consulting the other parent, because I have our child(ren)'s best interest at heart.
6. My child(ren)'s other parent and I can only exchange our child(ren): in a public setting; with an adult third party present; with the police present; and/or by maintaining a safe physical distance.
7. Because of my child(ren)'s other parent's actions, I have serious concerns regarding our child(ren)'s emotional and psychological functioning; peer or social relations; mother/child(ren) relationship; father/child(ren) relationship; school performance; behavior; and/or physical health.

NOTE: the taping or recording of others without their consent is usually illegal.

If you answered "YES" to one or more of the above questions, you may need a Highly Structured Parenting Plan, often used when parents are in conflict. For a Sample plan, go to www.jud12.flcourts.org

If you answered "NO" to all the above questions, please continue.

STEP THREE: DISTANCE ASSESSMENT

Do you and the other parent:

1. Live or plan to live more than 50 miles apart?
(contact during the week unlikely)

If you answered "YES", you may need a Long Distance Parenting Plan. For a Sample Long Distance Parenting Plan, go to www.jud12.flcourts.org.

If you answered "NO" please continue.

THESE QUESTIONS WILL HELP YOU RECOGNIZE YOUR ABILITIES AND NEEDS.

STEP FOUR: SELF-ASSESSMENT:

DAILY SCHEDULE

If you are employed outside the home: What time do you leave? _____ return? _____

If employed in the home, do you need to be home certain hours? Yes No

Can your schedule be changed? Yes No

Are there any demands on your time after normal work hours? Yes No

Is out-of-town travel required? Yes No If yes, how often? _____ How long are you gone? _____

OUTSIDE HELP

Do you have any additional help from other family or friends to care for your child(ren)? Yes No If so, describe: _____

Are you a caregiver for anyone other than your child(ren)? Yes No

TRANSPORTATION

Do you have reliable transportation? Yes No

A valid driver's license? Yes No

Do you have any health issues which might affect your driving ability? Yes No

PARENTING

In what events or situations does the child(ren):

Ask you for help? _____

Respond to your direction? _____

Not respond to your direction? _____
What do you do well as a parent? _____
What do you have trouble with as a parent? _____

COMMUNICATION

Do you have problems communicating with the other parent? Yes No Do you have E-mail access? Yes No
Internet access? Yes No Cell phone? Yes No Text Message? Yes No

FAMILY EVENTS

What events or holidays are the most important to you? _____

DISCIPLINE

What kind do you use? _____
What kind works for your child(ren)? _____

THESE QUESTIONS WILL HELP YOU RECOGNIZE THE OTHER PARENT'S ABILITIES AND NEEDS.

STEP FIVE: CO-PARENT ASSESSMENT:

DAILY SCHEDULE

If the other parent is employed outside the home: What time do they leave? _____ Return? _____
If the other parent is employed in the home, do they need to be home certain hours? Yes No
Can their schedule be changed? Yes No
Are there any demands on the other parent's time after normal work hours? Yes No
Is out-of-town travel required? Yes No If yes, how often? _____ How long are they gone? _____

OUTSIDE HELP

Does the other parent have any additional help from other family or friends? Yes No If so, describe:

Are they a caregiver for anyone other than your child(ren)? Yes No

TRANSPORTATION

Does the other parent have reliable transportation? Yes No A valid drivers license? Yes No
Do they have any health issues that effect their ability to drive? Yes No

PARENTING

In what events or situations does the child:
Ask for the other parent's help? _____
Respond to the other parent's direction? _____
Not respond to their direction? _____

What does the other parent do well as a parent? _____

What does the other parent have trouble with as a parent? _____

COMMUNICATION

Does the other parent have problems communicating with you? Yes No Does the other parent

Have e-mail? Yes No Internet? Yes No Cell phone? Yes No Text Msg? Yes No

FAMILY EVENTS

What events or holidays are important to the other parent? _____

DISCIPLINE

What kind does the other parent use? _____

What kind are works for your child(ren)? _____

*Go to the next page for the
Child Assessment section*

STEP SIX: CHILD ASSESSMENT:

THESE QUESTIONS ARE WRITTEN TO HELP YOU MAKE CHOICES THAT FIT THE NEEDS OF YOUR CHILD(REN), AND BOTH PARENTS.

Complete one for each child

FULL NAME OF CHILD:

DATE OF BIRTH:

1. What is the child's age? _____ School? _____ Grade? _____
2. Is the child closer to one parent than the other? Yes No
If Yes, which parent? _____
3. Has the child experienced any separations or deaths? Yes No
If Yes, when? _____ Describe: _____
4. Has the child ever been diagnosed by a licensed professional with any academic needs, physical problems or emotional disorders? Yes No
Evaluated by: _____
Diagnosis: _____ When Diagnosed? _____
If Yes, Treatment plan: _____
5. Has this child:
 - a. Changed schools other than for normal progression? Yes No
 - b. Been held a grade in school? Yes No
 - c. Skipped a grade in school? Yes No
 - d. Had difficulty in school? Yes No
 - e. Been provided an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)? Yes No
 - f. Been found to be academically gifted? Yes No
6. How long is the travel time

	from your home?	from your work?
a. Child's school?	_____	_____
b. Tutors?	_____	_____
c. Sporting activities?	_____	_____
d. Pediatrician?	_____	_____
e. Extracurricular activities?	_____	_____
f. Place of worship?	_____	_____
g. _____	_____	_____

7. How long is the travel time from other parent's home? from other parent's work?
- a. Child's school? _____
 - b. Tutors? _____
 - c. Sporting activities? _____
 - d. Pediatrician? _____
 - e. Extracurricular activities? _____
 - f. Place of worship? _____
 - g. _____

8. List the activities in which this child *currently* participates and check the days of the week on which these events occur.

_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mon	<input type="checkbox"/> Tues	<input type="checkbox"/> Wed	<input type="checkbox"/> Thurs	<input type="checkbox"/> Fri	<input type="checkbox"/> Sat	<input type="checkbox"/> Sun	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly

9. List any future planned activities:

10. How do you and this child spend time together? When?

BE HONEST ABOUT WHAT IS WORKING NOW. CHILDREN NEED A REGULAR SCHEDULE. **HOWEVER**, THERE ARE OFTEN TIMES WHEN SOMEONE WHO WAS NOT AN ACTIVE PARENT BEFORE THE SEPARATION MAY WISH TO BECOME MORE INVOLVED AFTER SEPARATION. THE INITIAL PLAN SHOULD PROVIDE THAT PARENT ENOUGH TIME TO DEVELOP A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP.

IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER:

- **MINIMIZE LOSS:** *Children experience a series of significant losses as a result of the parents' separation. To a child, parents' separating means losing home, family life, loving parents who care about each other, pets, financial security, familiar schools, friends, and a daily routine.*
- **MAXIMIZE RELATIONSHIPS:** *Encourage all relationships which existed for the children before the separation (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends.) Your children will keep the feeling of family when they have pleasant, free access to both parents and both extended families. Your child's identity depends on their feeling they belong to both families. If possible share the responsibilities (doctors' appointments, transportation) and the joyous events (holidays, movies, birthday parties).*
- **PROTECT YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS AND SENSE OF WELL BEING:** *Reassure the children that they are not responsible for the separation and try to avoid blaming the other parent for the separation as this forces a child to "take sides". Avoid confiding in them and sharing details of the adult relationships. While they may want to protect your feelings, they later feel confused and resentful. Children are harmed when they hear one parent say bad things about the other parent.*
- **INCREASE SECURITY:** *Scientific research confirms that children will suffer now and later if they frequently see their parents in conflict. Raised voices, arguing, hateful remarks, and physical altercations are not suitable for a child's viewing. Do not discuss adult issues at the time of transfers or when the child is present.*
- **AGE RELATED NEEDS:** *Children of different ages need and benefit from different parenting arrangements. Parents should try to be flexible and should try to tailor schedules as much as possible to reflect their child's developmental needs and individual requirements. You can expect that, as your child gets older, you will need to be more flexible and will need to work harder at communicating effectively and compromising fairly with both your child and the other parent.*

DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

The following information gives you an idea of what is common or the "norm". It will tell you what you might expect based on what we know about children. Remember that each of your children will develop differently. They have different strengths and skills and develop at different speeds. You may have children that are at different ages and they will have different needs. These are building blocks. A child needs to finish the tasks of one period before he can successfully move on, or emotional and behavioral problems will develop. You need to think about each of your children separately as you build your plan. Also, you should remember to look back at these guides as your children grow. You may want to or need to adjust your plans to meet their changes.

INFANTS: Birth to 9 Months

This is a very busy and important time. The infant is totally dependent on the adults around them while they touch, listen, and observe the world. Things are always changing. Infants learn very quickly. They are completely dependent on their caregivers to protect them and to provide constant attention to their needs. This includes their need for love, nurturing, and attention. They form attachments by consistent, loving responses such as holding, playing, feeding, soothing, and talking. When both parents have been actively involved, the child forms an attachment to both parents.

Changes and separations from the caregiving parent will cause discomfort and distress because an infant does not have a sense of time. They have a limited ability to remember the absent parent. Infants should have frequent contact with both parents. Infants trust their regular caregivers to recognize their signals for food, comfort, and sleep and trust their caregivers to meet these needs. Infants need to feel secure with routine and familiarly. They require a predictable schedule. Their sleeping, waking, feeding schedules should be consistent. Parents need to adjust their schedules to meet the infant's needs as this is an important time for the child to develop a sense of security, trust, and comfort with others.

If an infant's needs are not met, parents may notice that their child cries excessively, refuses food, fails to gain weight, has difficulty sleeping, fails to interact with the environment, or shows other signs of distress in one or both households.

When Designing Your Parenting Plan for your Infant, Remember:

- Frequent, repeated contact with each parent is recommended.
- Contact should provide time for feeding, playing, bathing, soothing, napping, and nighttime sleeping.
- Both parents must develop the required skills to be good caregivers.
- Infants should not be away from either parent for more than a few days.
- Parents will need to share their experiences in a way to provide consistency and stability. They must do this in a way that does not expose the child to anger and in a way that is comforting to the infant.

BABY/OLDER INFANT: 9 to 18 Months

Older infants are beginning to explore their world. There is a great deal of rapid development. There are many motor accomplishments: sitting, crawling, standing, and walking. They are still very dependent on their caregivers and they continue to need holding, caressing, gentleness, and nurturing. While they can hold on to a memory of an adult they haven't seen for a day or two, they still may show fear or distress at the time of the next contact and cannot tolerate long separations.

The older infant is self-centered and believes the actions and moods of others are directly related to their actions and moods. They recognize anger and harsh words. They show and express a wide range of emotions through their own gestures, actions, and expressions. They will begin to communicate with sounds, smiles and show simple emotions. They have special, familiar things that the parents ensure go with the child(ren) (toys, blankets, pacifiers).

The older infant still needs a great deal of holding, caressing, gentleness, and direct eye contact. They will now benefit greatly from repetitive play and having adults talk with them to share their language and their feelings. This is how they continue to feel safe while beginning to relate to the world around them.

A consistent routine increases their trust in others and their confidence that all of their needs will be met. They can become anxious if separated from familiar and comfortable surroundings. They will benefit from repetitive play and having adults talk to them. They will benefit from having similar routines in each household.

Your child will respond to multiple caregivers if each is sensitive to the child's cues and follows along with the required and routine activities (sleeping patterns, eating schedule, and wakeful activities). Long separations from either parent still feel like permanent losses, and they will show feelings of helplessness, abandonment, and sadness.

Infants have emotional memories and can recognize anger and harsh words. If their needs are not met and they do not feel secure, excessive crying, irritability, withdrawal, feeding or sleeping problems may develop.

When Designing Your Parenting Plan for Your Baby, Remember:

- Each parent should participate in the daily routines including feeding, bathing, putting the child down to sleep, and waking the child up from a nap. This will help the child develop a secure relationship and help both parents master the tasks of caretaking.
- Separations of more than three days may interfere with the child's sense of safety and stability. Work responsibilities must be balanced with the child's need for regular involvement with each parent during the weekdays and shared time of weekends.
- Each household should follow similar patterns and routines in child care to provide consistency.

TODDLER: 20 to 36 Months

Toddlers experience rapid physical, emotional, and social growth. They are on the move! They are developing a sense of independence and more control over the world around them. Mastery of language and toilet training occurs during this period. The toddler has a desire to explore the world and learn how things work. As they try to understand the world, they also try to change the rules, limits, and boundaries set by the caregivers. They have discovered that new word, "no."

Toddlers require a balance between their need for greater independence and their equally strong need for fair and consistent limits to keep them safe. They need to develop self-control and learn that trustworthy adults are caring for them. They need supervision, encouragement, and a high level of caregiver involvement. Patient, consistent, loving, supportive care is essential.

During separations, the toddler needs reminders that the important people have not disappeared, will return, and continue to love them. Nightly phone calls can be reassuring. Only when the child feels safe and secure can they begin to explore their world.

If a toddler's needs are not met, parents may notice that their child becomes anxious or irritable. The child may become clingy or excessively aggressive. Their sleep may be interrupted by bad dreams. Sometimes they will become fearful when transitions take place and begin to display behaviors they had already outgrown.

When Designing Your Parenting Plan for Your Toddler, Remember:

- Transitions can be difficult unless both parents have soothing styles and can meet the child's needs for structure and reassurance.
- Parenting must be adjusted to meet the child's need for success. Similar ways of handling events will provide a sense of comfort.
- Telephone calls at a regular hour can be a good way to "touch base" for the child and the parent. This keeps the relationship in the present.
- A picture of each parent in the child's room along with the "special blanket or teddy" that travels back and forth can be reassuring.
- It is best that overnights be spaced throughout the week.

PRE-SCHOOL, EARLY KINDERGARTEN: 36 Months to Age 5 $\frac{1}{2}$

Preschoolers are busy and creative in their thinking. They want to take charge of their ever-expanding world. They want to learn and try things out. They are beginning to enjoy time with other children and are learning how to cooperate and share. Because they have better cooperation and because they like to be 'big' they can take more responsibility in caring for themselves such as getting dressed, using feeding utensils, and picking up toys. They can begin to understand the idea of a day and a week but do not really understand time.

They are beginning to understand 'right' and 'wrong.' They are very observant. They begin to understand the difference between boys and girls and begin to watch the way their friends of the same gender make choices. They try to do the same things. They begin to understand that little boys grow into daddies and little girls grow into mommies. They begin to notice the ways that the parents relate to each other. They begin to imitate. This begins to set the stage for their own grown up relationships as well as how they will relate to each parent.

They will get enjoyment out of most activities if they observe their parents cooperate in planning and sharing in activities. They can find routine and feel safe and comfortable in each residence. Naps are replaced by quiet time and a change of pace in activities. They need consistency and predictability from the outside so they can find a way to calm themselves.

If the child's needs are not met, parents may observe persistent sleeping and/or eating problems. The child may show long periods of being moody: sadness, withdrawal, crying, anger. The child may refuse to engage in the activities provided. This is a time for them to learn how to become bigger than a toddler...they have work to do and need to be able to focus on their jobs. Transitions between households require positive support to help the child know that everybody is ok and gets along.

When Designing Your Parenting Plan for the Pre-School and Early Kindergarten Child, Remember:

- Take into consideration your child's temperament.
- Each parent should become competent and comfortable in helping the child be successful in the daily routine which includes getting ready for the school experiences. It is important to consider the amount of childcare each parent had provided prior to the separation.
- Participate in the daily routines like feeding, playing, bathing, reading.
- The child should be encouraged to take on some responsibility for self care actions (picking up toys, flushing the toilet, washing hands before meals) to develop independence and responsibility.
- If both parents have been involved in all aspects of care (before the separation) the child may be able to be away from either parent for two or three days. This may depend on the child's temperament.

EARLY SCHOOL: 5 to 9 Years

This period begins a long, more settled period of childhood. The child begins to have a variety of experiences away from the home and the family. Children become involved in their school activities and find other sports and interests that they share with a number of friends and other adults. While they are interested in their teachers and peers, they still need to please their parents most of all. They can begin to adapt to different styles of parenting and see the differences in different places and situations. They need to check in and touch base. They want the security of stable patterns in caretaking, and regular contact with each parent, including individual time with each parent. They want help in grooming, dressing, eating, and remembering things, but the more they learn and succeed at such tasks themselves the better they feel. Doing well at school and well at home makes the child feel good.

Early school children can understand the concept of time and routine. They can look forward to things that will happen and can remember things that were done before. They are better able to express things that are important to them and can find ways to get others involved.

They are beginning to understand the difference between fantasy and reality. They know what is "fair." They begin to have definite opinions about what they like and what they don't like. They learn to solve simple problems. If the child's needs are not being met there may be physical problems (tummy aches, headaches), sleep problems, expressions of anger, and a return to more childish behaviors (bed wetting, baby talk).

When Designing a Plan for the Early School Child, Remember:

- The child's schedule of school and after school activities must be considered so that the child can succeed in these areas.
- A consistent schedule and routine is necessary so that the child can focus on the job of school, friends, and team activities.
- Parents should select activities that match the child's interests and work together to balance these activities with the demands of school.
- Birthday parties and other peer activities will be important and may require some additional transportation and flexibility of parenting time.
- Provide support for the child's school program by setting a study routine and communicating with the teacher.
- Fewer midweek transitions make it easier for finishing school projects but both parents need to participate fully. Research shows that children with fathers involved in their schooling perform better in school.

PRE-TEEN: 10 to 12 Years

These children are preparing to make the leap into adolescence. They become far more independent and want to do things for themselves. They pay attention to the way they look and the acceptance of a peer group is very important. Their increased ability to think logically and their more developed sense of conscience may lead to stronger judgments, statements of opinion, and increased arguments. They can discuss issues in detail, want explanations for other's decisions, and want the freedom to solve problems on their own. They may side more with their peers and confide in them more readily. They will often choose to be with their friends over their family.

Children begin to develop and test values and belief systems. Children this age need to be able to express their feelings but must recognize that the parents make the final decisions.

They may choose to side with one parent over the other. This may change based on the specific issue or the parenting style. They need to be encouraged and given permission to love both parents and understand that the parents' separation matters are not their burden.

There is a difficult balance between providing structure and creating the chance for independence. Families need flexibility so the child may have the time required with friends and activities as well as with both parents. Parents need to encourage the move towards independence while providing reasonable and consistent limits and boundaries.

There is cause for concern if a pre-teen child loses interest in friends and other relationships and begins to isolate (spending extended times in his room, skipping meals and activities, not going out or not answering the phone). A child working too hard at being "too good" could suggest a high level of internal stress or desire to cover up. If the child begins to take sides or feels the need to take sides with one parent there is greater chance of depression and rebellion. A change in school performance and peer group may indicate some loss of well-being.

When Designing a Plan for Your Pre-Teen, Remember:

- Parenting plans must provide frequent, meaningful contact with both parents.
- Pre-Teen children do well with many different options of parenting plans as long as the contact is structured and consistent. When possible, plans should include overnights during the school week and on weekends so that both parents may be active participants.
- Schedules can provide longer times away from either parent (up to a week) but must take into consideration the child's activities and school responsibilities.
- Children should be given open telephone access to the other parent and be given privacy for the calls.
- Rules and routine between the households should have some consistency and continuity for increased success.
- Develop a format for discussing the child's academic and extra-curricular activities without including the child in discussions (journal, email communication, phone conference, "business like" meeting).
- Children can be consulted about their views and suggestions, but the parents should still make the final decision.

TEEN: 13 to 15 Years:

Children between thirteen and fifteen use the family as a base for support and guidance. Though they may not show it, young adolescents continue to need both the nurturing and the oversight of their parents. Decision making ability varies widely in this age group as well as from one situation to another.

Girls tend to mature earlier than boys. The primary task for children of this age is one of increasing independence from the family and developing a separate identity. They are involved in the difficult task of preparing themselves to function as young adults.

As their bodies change and they begin to physically develop into adults, they may feel more self-conscious, they may feel more emotionally sensitive, and their need for privacy will increase. It is necessary to provide them privacy while staying aware of their activities. There is an increase in moodiness, tiredness, and sloppiness. They will want to have a "say" in things that matter to them. They want explanations, will voice their opinions more loudly, and may become argumentative.

Children have frequently formed close relationships with other teachers, adults, peers, and generally regard their relationships with their peers as the most important relationships in their lives. They want to spend much more time with their friends and less time with their parents. They have strong opinions and want to have more control over their lives. They should be expected to assume greater responsibility for their decisions and consequences of their actions. If they are given some flexibility in their schedules and the arrangements, most adolescents can adapt, compromise, and enjoy the limited time they chose to spend with the parent.

Parents need to provide safe options for this exploration while setting reasonable limits and appropriate rules (curfew, family tasks, responsibility for schoolwork). The challenge for parents of these early adolescents is to support their growing independence while maintaining basic structure and close contact with both parents. The guidelines must be reasonable, firm, and fair, as should the privileges and consequences. It will be important that the parents talk or communicate directly with each other to be certain that the child is safe and accountable. Children are exposed to a variety of situations that put them at risk, and parents must stay informed and able to discuss these hard topics (sexual behaviors, alcohol use, drug abuse).

If the teen's needs are not met, there may be excessive anger and negativity. Children this age may begin to hide out or stay away from others. School difficulties become evident as the demands of school become greater. There will be an increase in the acting out, sometimes with increased sneakiness, lying, and risky behaviors. Out and out defiance of rules is a real concern.

When Writing a Plan for Your Early Teen, Remember:

- The child's schedule, commitments, and obligations must be taken into consideration.
- Flexible creative plans that would not have worked for younger children may be considered.
- While each parent may have a longer period of time without the child in residence, the parent should increase contact and awareness through regular attendance at the child's athletic events, performances, academic events, and other activities.
- Frequent communication between parents is advised as children may distort the situation and seek to play one parent against the other. Consider communicating by using a journal, email, phone calls, or "business like" meeting.

OLDER ADOLESCENT: 15 to 18 Years:

Children this age are preparing to become independent and self-sufficient young adults. It is necessary for them to have a gradual and healthy separation from both parents. These adolescents are making decisions about how they want to be and where they want their lives to go. They will establish their own sense of self with regard to rules and behaviors, taking into consideration the family, the peer group, and their community standards. Adolescents are developing their own personal standards. They have developed strong and lasting relationships with both boys and girls. Appearance and "fitting in" continue to be important. Closer groups begin to form that have something in common.

By late adolescence, they have begun to view their parents as individuals with qualities they both like and dislike. They begin to figure out how that may affect who they are and who they want to be. The peer group has great impact on choices that they make. Children are particularly vulnerable to changes in the family and pressure from outside the family. Maintaining stability and consistency can be challenging as an adolescent's feelings are often changeable and intense.

Increased schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and jobs become important. Many students begin to focus on future goals such as work, further education, or other post-high-school plans.

The freedom to set their own schedule (both between households and about driving, curfews, dating, and overnights) becomes a priority. Parents should be aware of a teenager's efforts to be in control while the teenager's judgment and experience is still limited. The driver's license adds freedom which increases the need for trust, communication, and accountability.

This is a "practice" for their being out on their own, so it becomes a period of teaching and learning. They need the opportunity to make plans while the parents maintain age-appropriate guidelines and structure. Privileges come with responsibilities. Compromise is encouraged when conflicts arise between the wishes of adolescents and their parents, including conflicts regarding the contact schedule.

When Designing a Plan for Your Older Adolescent, Remember:

- Adolescents do well with a variety of parenting plans.
- Parents need to be aware of the adolescent's need to be consulted, informed, and involved when making the schedule and making family plans.
- Parenting times and schedules will need to take into consideration school demands, job hours, automobile access, and extra-curricular and social activities.
- Adolescents need to balance time between independent social time with peers and meaningful family time.

IN ALL PLANS IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER:

- *Children develop best when both parents have meaningful and stable involvement in their children's lives.*
- *Each parent has different and valuable contributions to make to their children's development.*
- *It is better for young children to spend more time with parents and less time with other caregivers. When both parents work, parents should make every attempt to choose mutually-acceptable and accessible caregivers.*
- *Communication and cooperation between parents is important. Consistent rules in both households and sharing of knowledge of events, creates a sense of security for children of all ages. Households must discuss and plan school activities and other events.*
- *If children are allowed to bring their personal items back and forth between the households, they develop a better sense of ownership and responsibility. Parents should purchase special things for the children but not merely for their own household.*
- *Children need to be protected from adult conflicts. They should not be exposed to arguments, hostility, and negative comments between the parents. They do not want to hear negative things about someone they love.*
- *They should not be messengers...they are the children. The parents should do the adult work so that children may complete the tasks of being children.*

The Do's and Don'ts of Parenting
Both Parents

DO:

- Maintain healthy communication with your children.
- Make it a priority to communicate regularly with the other parent.
- Religiously follow the parenting plan to make the process routine, easy and positive for your children.
- Strive to keep your word to the children.
- Contact the other parent immediately if there is an emergency involving the children while they are with you.

DON'T:

- Be uncooperative. The children will suffer consequences if their parents do not cooperate.

Parent A

(The parent with whom the child has more time-sharing)

DO:

- Share information about school, teachers, activities, friends and relatives with the other Parent.
- Be flexible and supportive of the children's relationship with the other Parent.
- Encourage excitement for the anticipated communication and/or travel with the other Parent.

DON'T:

- Edit, coach, monitor, or otherwise interfere with the children's communication with the other Parent.
- Take it personally if the children do not wish to call you regularly when they are with the other parent.

Parent B

(The parent with whom the child has less scheduled time-sharing)

DO:

- Make an extra effort to initiate contact with the children and educate yourself of their daily activities.
- Provide an itinerary to the other parent to prepare the children for the trip and to advise the other parent of the activities you are planning.
- Strive to keep your word to the children.

DON'T:

- Take it personally if the children do not wish to stay on the phone too long or do not call right back.
- Don't unreasonably limit the children's contact with the local parent during their stay.

REMEMBER

BE HONEST! Think about your child(ren)'s ages, personalities, their likes and dislikes, interests, activities, ability to talk to the other parent, etc. Each family is different. There is no single parenting plan that is right for every family. Each parent will be asked to define a schedule that works best for your child(ren).

THIS IS YOUR CHANCE TO CREATE A SCHEDULE THAT WORKS FOR YOUR CHILD(REN). REMEMBER YOUR PARENTING SCHEDULE MAY CHANGE AS YOUR CHILD(REN) GROW.

REVIEW YOUR PARENTING PLAN WHEN:

- * a child starts school
- * a child's schedule changes
- * a parent remarries
- * anyone experiences any major change