

## Creating a Parenting Plan

When a couple decides to end their marital relationship they are required to be legally separated for 365 days before they can divorce. In order to legally separate, the couple must have a formal separation agreement which describes how they will divide important things like finances, property, debt, and assets. For parents, important decisions must also be made about how the family will function after they have separated. This is called the parenting plan.

The parenting plan is a document that describes how the parents will share their children. It covers important topics like time sharing arrangements and provisions for making up for missed time with children for any reason. The parenting plan considers how the summer schedule will be shared, how the holiday schedule will be managed, whether there are limitations on the number or cost of extracurricular activities, how the parents will communicate with one another about the children, who goes on the school field trips and so much more. All these decisions certainly can be discussed by a family lawyer or mediator. However, without in-depth knowledge of children's developmental stages and extensive experience working with children there is a great likelihood of creating a parenting plan that only considers the children at their current age or ability and does not provide for how their needs and preferences may change as they mature.

Why is this of concern? A short-sighted parenting plan results in conflict between the parents because invariably the parents come up against an issue that is not described in the parenting plan. Without guidance within the parenting plan, the parents are left to their own devices to determine what the best course of action is. And let's face it, emotions are high and feelings are hurt during most separations and it is quite likely that many parents are not capable of successfully negotiating complex family issues in the midst of adjusting to a separation and establishing lives apart from one another.

And what is worse, the conflict that arises between parents spills over to involve and upsets the children. Children have a difficult enough task to accept their circumstance and learn to live between two homes and two families. It is unfair to children to tell them parents separate so they won't argue anymore and then force the children to endure ongoing arguing because of questions that arise from an unsatisfactory or inadequate parenting plan. It is an unfortunate fact that many children blame themselves for a separation and their suspicion is strengthened when they witness their separated parents arguing about them.

It is in your best interest, and that of your family, to have your parenting plan prepared by a qualified and experienced professional. You can ensure that your parenting plan considers and includes the development of your children and is flexible enough to allow for any likely change in how your family functions as your children mature over time by having a parenting coordinator/psychotherapist prepare it for you. And the parenting coordinator can work to create a parenting plan that is a seamless addendum to the separation agreement prepared by your lawyer or mediator.