

The 7 Strategies for Determining Your Parenting Plan

The Parenting Plan is the parental agreement setting out how the children will be cared for between separated parents. Most broadly, it stipulates the residential arrangement and how decisions shall be made affecting the child. The parenting plan may also include agreements with regard to extra-curricular activities, education, faith and health. If there are particular needs or wants by either parent or regarding the child specifically those can be included too. In the event parents cannot agree on something that arises upon completion of the Parenting Plan, the plan can also include a statement as to how differences will be resolved. Essentially, the Parenting Plan is the road map that separated parents will follow for the raising of their kids.

The objective in detailing a Parenting Plan is to provide as smooth a parenting path to follow as possible so your children can enjoy a meaningful relationship with both parents to achieve a good developmental outcome – be a well rounded person who gets along with others and is successful in life.

While some parents may fret the details of the plan, the most important determinant to how well children of separated parents develop has less to do with the actual details, including the time lived in each parent's home, faith, choice of school, extra-curricular activity, etc. The most important determinant is actually parental conflict. The greater the conflict between the parents, the greater the risk for a poor outcome for the child. The degree to which parents can find reasonable solutions to their differences, the children are better off. The degree to which parents may find themselves in ongoing conflict, then the greater the necessity or specifying as much detail as possible and the greater the necessity to limit or control for contact between the parents.

As best as possible, parents are encouraged to develop parenting plan between themselves, as opposed to having a plan imposed through court or arbitration which is not to say that court or

arbitration may not be necessary, but should be considered a last resort.

The reason for parents to first try and develop a plan between themselves is because no other third party will ever know the details of your life, like yourselves. Further, those plans agreed to between parents tend to be better followed and longer lasting. While a solution may be imposed through court or arbitration, inevitably one or other parent is dissatisfied with the outcome and that parent may try to change it either directly by seeking to return the matter to court or arbitration or indirectly by doing what they want to do anyways. Thus imposed outcomes, do not necessarily end conflict.

Consider these strategies when seeking to resolve a Parenting Plan;

1. Sit down privately with the other parent to discuss matters between yourselves;
2. If you are concerned about behavior and still want to discuss things directly with the other parent, choose a public place to meet or include a mutually agreed upon person to join you. This can be someone you both trust in a professional capacity, your clergy, a counselor, a mutual friend (who is able to remain neutral);
3. Meet with a trained counselor whose expertise is helping separated parents communicate between themselves;
4. Meet with a [mediator](#) whose expertise includes working with separated parents. A mediator is a professional whose expertise is helping people in conflict reach agreements between themselves by working with them together, even though the notion can be anxiety producing. You only need to be willing to try. You don't have to believe that yourself or the other parent will actually come to an agreement. In fact, more often than not, people who attend mediation are of the opinion that it is "the other person" who will not be able to reach an agreement, yet most matters do settle or at least are narrowed down by the process;
5. Retain "collaborative" lawyers and sign a participation agreement. [Collaborative lawyers](#) are trained in helping people find solutions to their differences without the threat of going to court. Like mediators, they

work outside of the court system and can help you craft specific agreements taking into account the particulars of your situation. Also like mediation, collaborative lawyers and parents meet and work together to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions;

6. [Lawyer assisted negotiation](#) is more for those persons who will not meet together. Each parent tells their own lawyer their view of the situations and what they hope to achieve. The lawyers then negotiate between themselves on your behalf. With this approach, you may never know how well your lawyer represented your situation and you may not be privy to their actual communication with the other lawyer. In the hands of a skilled negotiator who themselves will remain civil, respectful and not inordinately demanding but conciliatory, this can lead to a resolution. However, this approach is at risk of actually inflaming conflict and the parents will likely never achieve the degree of specificity they may desire because the lawyers will never be as intimately connected to your situation. If you use this approach, ask to read every letter your lawyer sends on your behalf before it is sent. Angry demand letters produce angry demanding responses. Know what is being sent as those letters will represent you to the other parent. Unfortunately, in many cases, lawyer assisted negotiation increases conflict and is a prelude to litigation
7. Litigation is the option of last resort where the final outcome is fully in the hands of a third party, be it a judge or an arbitrator (private judge). Litigation often entails the telling of respective stories from the past that may have little to do with the present situation, but presents each parent in the [worst possible light](#). This can hurt relationship beyond repair. However and with arbitration specifically, you at least get to choose who hears your case and typically people choose an arbitrator who has particular expertise in the area of concern. However, arbitration is a privately paid service and hence may be more expensive than court, particularly if both parents include their lawyers. Arbitration can be less costly though if the parents share the cost

and attend on their own. There are many pro's and con's to attending court or arbitration and with or without legal representation.

Be careful who you seek advice from to determine which approach is best for you. There can be considerable bias towards the service one offers. To determine what is best for you, it is advisable to speak with several mediators, collaborative lawyers and litigators. Beware of hollow promises and keep in mind that agreements made between the parents directly, no matter how they are assisted, tend to be better followed and longer lasting.

By the way, you will be co-parenting no matter what. The only question is the degree to which you do so successfully and in the end, peace between the parents provides for the better outcome for children regardless of what you agree to.

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