

Parenting Plan Considerations

In intact relationships, parents do not usually consider how decisions are made with regard to the care of the children, let alone who would carry out the various parenting tasks. However, once parents are living separate and apart, these issues must be clearly specified, understood and agreed upon to avoid conflict and assure proper care.

A *Parenting Plan* is a written agreement between separated parents setting out the rules and structures for the ongoing care of the children. Parenting plans are constructed with sensitivity to the developmental and cultural needs of the children and the ability of the parents to meet those needs given respective parental strengths, weaknesses and willingness.

Parenting Plans are generally developed on a consensus-building model between the parents, whose efforts may be supported by others. Depending on the nature and quality of support required, supports may include legal counsel, parenting coaches, child specialists, family specialists and other specialists with knowledge, expertise and training in matters such as: mental health, addictions, domestic violence, child development and the like.

As with the development of any plan between separated parents, it is necessary to be mindful of power and control issues and imbalances that could give rise to lop-sided agreements; agreements not necessarily in the best interests of the children; or agreements that may perpetuate harm or may place persons at risk of harm.

Parenting Plans typically contemplate matters in terms of responsibilities and authority as well as set out rules and structure for the direct care of the children between the parents. By way of example, one parent may retain authority for deciding a medical procedure, yet the other parent may be responsible for assuring attendance and implementation of the decision.

In view of the above, the Parenting Plan document will usually address at least, the following:

- Distribution of time the children are in each parents' care;
- Consideration for holidays, birthdays, special occasions, religious days, summer vacation;
- Transfer of care of children between the parents including transportation arrangements;
- Purchase/exchange of belongings;
- Healthcare decisions and responsibilities;
- Access to information;
- Extracurricular activities (how choices are made and rules for parental attendance);
- Involvement of new partners/family;
- Change of name;
- Religion;
- Education;
- Parental communication;
- Decision making processes and dispute resolution processes;
- Limits/rules on mobility and/or travel;
- Date or circumstances for review;
- Considerations for special problems (geographical distances, mental health, abuse/violence, etc.)

Parents are advised to consider the input of a professional with experience in these matters to be assured that their plan is appropriate to the developmental, emotional, psychological and safety needs of the child.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.