

**General and Specific Time Sharing Issues
For the
Parents of Children of Divorce**

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND GOALS

Following a divorce or separation, parents should cooperate in their efforts to help their children continue to grow emotionally, socially, and intellectually, and to ensure that their children continue to have meaningful relationships with both the parent with whom they primarily live (the “primary caregiver” or “primary residential parent”) and with their other parent (the “secondary caregiver” or their “secondary residential parent”).

The Parental Time Sharing Schedules are intended to minimize the harm done to children when their parents divorce or separate. They are written from the standpoint of children’s needs and attempts to guide parents seeking to meet the best interests of their children and they are intended only as a default in the event the parties cannot agree to a visitation arrangement.

In developing schedules for contact between children and their parents following a separation or divorce, the following factors need to be considered:

A. Minimize Loss

Children experience divorce as a series of significant losses. To a child, divorce means losing home, family life, loving parents who care about each other, pets, financial security, relationships with extended family, familiar schools, sports activities, and a daily schedule. Children often feel abandoned and uprooted. The disrupting effect of divorce on their lives can have profound consequences for children as they reach adulthood. Respect your children’s pain by eliminating as many changes and losses as possible.

B. Maximize Relationships

It is important to encourage all relationships which existed between your children and others before the divorce (both parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, close adult friends, etc.). Your children will most likely keep the feeling of family when they continue to have pleasant, free access to both parents and extended family. Your children’s identity depends on their feeling that they belong to both families. This identity requires that your children spend time with both sides of the family. If your children lose contact with parts of their family, their sense of identity can be distorted, even crippled. Treasure the involvement of extended family in your children’s lives.

It is also essential to encourage and support the other parent in accepting an active parenting role which includes sharing the burden of responsibilities (laundry, transportation, doctor visits, teacher conferences, etc.) as well as the joyous occasions (holidays, birthdays parties, movies, sports outings, trips, etc.). Respect the basic nature or temperament of your children, as well as the temperamental match or fit between each child and each parent. Consider the match of each parent’s interests and each child’s activities. Provide as much direct contact and positive involvement as possible between each child and each parent. When parents are able to remain in the same geographical location, relationships are more likely to be maximized.

Never make your children feel guilty about enjoying their time with their other parent; enjoyment of that time is a tribute to the security that both you and the other parent have instilled in your children and suggests that your children are learning to trust and explore a wide range of healthy relationships.

Reassure your children that they are not to blame for the divorce and that both parents still love them. Avoid blaming the other parent (it is destructive to children's security and self concepts when they are compelled to "take sides" after a divorce). You should also avoid confiding details of your marital problems to your children; although they may initially want the details and may want to alleviate your pain/anger by "taking sides" with you, they may ultimately resent you for confusing them and increasing their anxieties about their freedom to love and relate comfortably to both of their parents.

C. Increase Security

Your children are likely to feel protected from losses when allowed to remain in the safety, consistency, and support of old, familiar surroundings. Children feel secure when they have positive time with both parents, the familiarity of established family rules, as well as being allowed to continue in previously established religious, school, and related activities. Children do best when their parents live proximate to one another, especially if they share the same school district. Children can then have the reassurance of familiar after-school friends at both parents' homes. Children also feel most secure when their parents share responsibility for their after-school care. Parents need to talk about ways to build certainty, structure, and stability in their children's lives.

D. Avoid Conflict

Scientific research verifies that your children will suffer both now and later if they frequently see their parents in conflict. Raised voices, arguing, hateful remarks, and physical altercations are not suitable for child viewing. Children are also harmed when they hear one parent say bad things about the other parent. If one parent directly or indirectly creates an image of the other parent that is in any way negative, the child's own self-image will be assaulted. Children will only feel as good about themselves as they do about each parent.

A good procedure for divorced/separated parents to follow is to never try to discuss child issues and adult issues in the same conversation. When you are talking with your former spouse about child issues (scheduling visits, vacation plans, school or medical problems, etc.), stick to those topics and do not allow the conversation to drift into discussions of problems between you and your former spouse (money, angry issues, etc.). Save those topics for another discussion at another time and never discuss them in the presence of your children. If you and your children's other parent simply cannot avoid fighting and arguing when you begin/end visits, you might want to consider enlisting the help of another person (grandparent, mutual friend, babysitter, etc.) who will agree to serve as a "neutral zone" where both parents can bring the children for transfer and avoid contact with each other.

It is encouraged that each parent involve himself and herself in school functions in which the minor child(ren) is engaged. In doing so, the parents should make every effort to act appropriately so as not to embarrass the minor child in the presence of his or her peers.

E. 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 their schedules as much as possible to reflect their children's developmental needs and individual requirements. You can expect that, as your children get older, you will need to be more flexible and will need to work hard at communicating effectively and compromising fairly with both your children and their other parent.

When parties are the parents of infants the primary residential parent should promote consistency in the child(ren)'s nutrition and environment by supplying items such as the infant's

formula, clothing, blankets, pacifier, wipes, toys, and infant car seat to the secondary residential parent as may be needed.

F. Right of First Refusal

If either parent intends to be absent from the home overnight during time sharing with the child(ren) which would require child care arrangements (i.e. babysitter), he/she should give the other parent the option of having time sharing with the child(ren) for the night in question.

If either parent has time sharing during a non-specified holiday, including but not limited to teacher planning days, and that parent intends to leave the child(ren) for 3 hours or more with a babysitter, daycare worker, or person other than a family member, that parent should give the other parent the option of having time sharing with the child(ren) for the non-specified holiday. The parent who has the option of time sharing with the child(ren) should notify the other parent whether he/she intends to exercise the option within a reasonable time of learning of the option to have time sharing.

G. Reintroduction of Absent Parent

The visitation guidelines assume each parent has been a continuous presence in the minor child(ren)'s life. In the event a parent has limited or no contact with his/her child(ren) and wishes to be reintegrated into the child(ren)'s life, it is not always in the best interest of the minor child(ren) to immediately begin visiting with that parent pursuant to the Model Parental Time Sharing Schedule. As such, the parties should attempt to create an alternate visitation plan to allow for a gradual reintegration.

H. Cancellations

If a parent wishes to cancel time sharing periods, he/she should do so by providing the other parent notice at least 14 days prior to the time sharing period which the parent wishes to cancel. Cancellation of a specific time sharing period of longer than 72 hours in duration should only occur with the consent of both parents. If the cancellation of a specific time sharing period is not agreed to by both parents, the parent seeking to cancel time sharing should arrange and/or pay for babysitting, child care or other appropriate supervision of the child for the time sharing period.

I. Mediation before Litigation

In the event the parties are unable to agree to disputes concerning visitation, it is encouraged that they mediate their disputes before applying to the court for resolution.

SHARED PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Parental Time Sharing Schedules assume that parents are prepared to share the difficult responsibility of raising children in separate homes and are mature and responsible enough to do so. Shared parental responsibility means that each parent has full rights and duties with respect to their child(ren). In fact, "it is the public policy of [the State of Florida] to assure that each minor child has frequent and continuing contact with both parents after the parents separate or the marriage of the parties is dissolved and to encourage parents to share the rights, responsibilities, and joys, of childrearing." Florida Statute §61.13 (2)(b)1. The parents must confer with each other so that major decisions affecting the child(ren) are made jointly, unless specified otherwise by agreement of the parties or Order of the Court. Issues dealing with school, discipline, religious upbringing, and health are examples of areas where the parents must confer.

Each parent is entitled to the child's medical, dental, and school records. Florida Statute §61.13 (2)(b)(3) specifically requires that "access to records and information pertaining to a minor child, including, but not limited to medical records may not be denied to a parent because the parent is not the child's primary residential parent."

The Parental Time Sharing Schedules are designed to help accomplish three goals: 1) to ensure that child(ren) of parents who do not live together will have an opportunity to develop a relationship with each parent that will be loving and meaningful, 2) to permit each parent to spend as much quality time with their children as is consistent with the child's developmental needs, and 3) to give guidance to the parents as to what is expected of them regarding their obligations to the other parent.

If a Parental Time Sharing Schedule is to be successful, the relationship between the parents must be businesslike. THE CHILD(REN) SHOULD NOT TO BE EXPOSED TO HOSTILITY, CONFLICT, RECRIMINATIONS, OR ARGUMENT BETWEEN HIS/HER/THEIR PARENTS. FURTHERMORE, THE CHILD(REN) SHOULD NOT TO BE USED AS A MESSENGER SERVICE THROUGH WHOM THE PARENTS COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER. Thus, the parents should be courteous and respectful of each other. The goal of the parents should be to provide the child(ren) a safe, secure, loving environment in which his/her development as a human being is the priority of those who brought him/her into the world.

(Note: This is not intended to be an Order of the Court)