

A Guide to Making Child-Focused Parenting Time Decisions 2014

*A Publication of the 8th Judicial Circuit
Family Law Advisory Group (FLAG)*

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LIMITATIONS

This information in this pamphlet:

DOES NOT replace or change any parenting time schedule agreed upon by the parents or set forth in a court order.

DOES NOT prohibit or limit parents or judges from establishing parenting time schedules that differ from those described in this pamphlet.

DOES NOT mandate minimum or maximum parenting time limits.

DOES NOT apply to ALL families or to all children in all circumstances.

IS NOT “the LAW” and, while they are encouraged to consider, parents are not required to follow the parenting time suggestions in this pamphlet.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

The parenting time suggestions in this pamphlet may not be appropriate if there is genuine concern about a child’s emotional and physical safety when with a parent. The parenting time suggestions here may not apply or may need to be adjusted, if any of the following special situations exist:

- Physical, sexual, or emotional child abuse has occurred.
- Domestic violence has occurred between the parents or between a parent and child.
- Drug or alcohol abuse has occurred.

Child Abuse, Domestic Violence and Chemical Dependency

Parents who have valid concerns for the safety of their children should seek help from an attorney, mediator, court services, a mental health professional, domestic abuse office, or the local county social services agency.

When a Parent Has Been Absent

When a parent, for whatever reason, has never been a part of the child’s life or has not had any contact with the child for an extended period of time either in person, by phone, or in writing, BOTH parents should consider the possible problems the child may have if lengthy or overnight parenting time were to start right away. Instead, the parenting time schedule should *gradually re-introduce parent and child*, taking into consideration the child’s stage of development and the child’s ability to transition well to parenting time with the parent.

To the Reader:

You have been sharing the parenting responsibilities for your children since they were born. You have worked out your roles with respect to schedules, school, meals, laundry, homework, housekeeping chores, discipline, participation in extra-curricular activities and sports. Separation and divorce call for a unique shifting of your roles--into separate houses. Despite these changes, both of you remain EQUALLY important to your children.

YOU STILL SHARE THE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITY.

THE PRINCIPLES OF SHARED PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

1) Shared responsibility: Since 2008 the State of Florida has a family law that no longer uses "custody" or "primary residential parent" or "secondary" parent. These terms have at times made one parent feel less important. Both parents are equally valuable to every child and the child has a right to open access to both parents; it is, in fact, in their best interests under the law to have access to both their parents. The policy of the State of Florida with respect to Family Law has long been to support a shared responsibility for the parenting of children after divorce. All the research supports the idea that children fare much better in the world when they have contact with both their parents following separation or divorce.

As a result the new law now **REQUIRES** you to file a Parenting Plan. It requires you to map out where your children will be, and which parent will make decisions on which issues (health care, school-related issues) and how the parents plan to communicate with each other about these issues. It helps you decide how you will share your parenting responsibilities.

2) Mutual respect: You are getting a divorce; you are not expected to like or love each other at this point. You are, however, expected by the statute to be child-focused and this demands that you behave with mutual respect and courtesy toward each other, **ESPECIALLY** in the presence of your children.

More importantly, you must now set aside your differences in order to make the transition to two houses a smoother one for your children. Conflict between the parents is the one thing that we know harms them in the short term, and in the long term.

3) Shared love and concern: Children whose parents divorce or separate need to be assured the concept of their family of a mother and father remains intact. The family is not broken; it just occupies two houses now. Your children need the assurance that they are still loved.

4) Children first: In the middle of your divorce process, it will be difficult to be child-focused when all your energy and stress is captured in surviving the changes you are experiencing! Nonetheless, the children have not created this situation and deserve to be valued above all else. Accept that they love both of you and want/need time with both of you; accept that you **MUST** shelter them from your conflicts with your spouse. 2

This means:

- **Psychologically and verbally grant them permission to love the other parent.**
- **Avoid any negative statements about the other parent.**
- **Be careful to avoid even hostile phone conversations that they may overhear.**

5) Respect boundaries: Where your spouse now lives and with whom is no longer your business; how your spouse now parents the children under their roof is not your business unless there is abuse or neglect occurring.

• Establish a way to communicate that respects the time and need to know of the other parent. Work TOGETHER to establish routines and discipline that is as close as possible to what your children's life was like before the separation/divorce. Parenting from as close to the "same page" as before creates more stability for your children in transitioning from Mom's house to Dad's house and back. Seek the help of a mental health professional when the conflict between you appears more important than the children!

6) Respect differences: Your differences may have been the cause of your breakup. Respecting those differences with an eye towards managing them as parents is crucial. Moving into a non-married co-parent role is your primary job during this phase of your divorce process. *Divorce is a process, not the date when the documents are all filed and signed.* It may take some time to adjust to all the differences that a Mom's House-Dad's House arrangement brings. (It is highly recommended that you buy the book **Mom's House, Dad's House** by Isolini Ricci! A bibliography of helpful books is included in the Appendix section.)

As you begin to put together your parenting plan it is important to remember that studies show children can benefit when parents follow these simple

DIVORCE RULES:

- Help the child have regular contact with the other parent by phone, letter, audio and videotapes, e-mail, and other forms of communication
- Keep predictable schedules
- Be on time and have the child ready when it's time for the child to go with the other parent
- Exchange the child without arguing
- Support the child's relationship with the other parent
- Let the child carry "important" items such as favorite clothes, toys, and security blankets with them between the parents' homes
- Follow similar routines for mealtime, bedtime, and homework time
- Handle rules and discipline in similar ways
- Support contact with grandparents, stepparents, and other extended family so the child doesn't lose these relationships
- BE FLEXIBLE so the child can take part in special family celebrations and events
- Give as much advance notice as possible to the other parent about special occasions or necessary changes to the schedule

- Provide the other parent with travel dates, destinations, and places where the child and the parent can be reached when on vacation
- Establish workable and respectful communication with the other parent
- Plan their vacations around the child's regularly scheduled activities.

Studies also show children may be harmed when parents commit the following NO-NO's:

- Make their child choose between them
- Question their child about the other parent's activities or relationships
- Make promises they don't keep
- Drop in and out of the child's life
- Are inconsistent in using their parenting time
- Argue with or put down the other parent in front of the child or where the child can overhear
- Discuss their personal problems with the child or where the child can overhear
- Use the child as a messenger, spy, or mediator
- Stop or interfere with parenting time because child support hasn't been paid
- Don't show respect for each other
- Undermine the child's relationship with the other parent.

The Parenting Plan

Shared parenting from two households is new territory; you are not expected to feel any more ready than you were when you first had your children! However, there are ways to be better prepared. Read some of the materials listed in the Appendix section, such as the Mom's House, Dad's House book. Attend groups at your church and in your community that encourage shared parenting, or co-parenting if you prefer that term. You CAN get the tools and the coping skills to manage the changes in your life and your family. Many of these same tools and skills can lead to a less conflicted divorce or separation. Remember, reducing conflict is absolutely in both your best interests and your children's as you establish two households, and a good Parenting Plan is critical to your success.

Putting together your Parenting Plan

The information in this packet is intended to provide helpful ideas in making decisions about your parenting plan. A parenting plan is a document that states when the children will be with each parent (shared parenting time) and how major decisions (health care, school-related issues) will be made. Parents are encouraged to read this material and seek additional information and advice in order to make the best plan for their children. The ideas presented here may help parents reduce conflict and reach agreements more easily. These ideas should be used to design a parenting plan that will work best for you and your children.

WHY PARENTING PLANS ARE NECESSARY

Raising children presents challenges. When parents live in separate homes, the challenges are greater because relationships become more complicated. Positive involvement with both parents furthers the child's emotional and social development, academic achievement, and overall adjustment. Parenting plans are helpful in keeping both parents involved, and helping children in their adjustments to the divorce. Written parenting plans provide children and parents with predictability and consistency and having this kind of structure can give kids a sense of stability and may help prevent future conflict. Courts prefer that parents reach agreements about parenting time. When parents reach agreements, they are more likely to cooperate as their children grow up. The research is clear in showing children do best when their parents cooperate with each other. Research also shows the reverse is true. Children who experience ongoing conflict between parents are at high risk for long-term emotional problems.

A key to successful co-parenting is a well thought out parenting plan that states the agreements parents reach about the sharing of rights and privileges, and the schedule for parenting time. As you set about preparing your parenting plan there are three things you should keep in mind. These are

- **minimizing the transitions** your child needs to make,
- **maximizing the amount of time children spend with each parent**, and
- **working to establish a strong and positive attachment between parent and child.**

Minimizing transitions means you want to consider how often your child is traveling between one home and the other, particularly for overnights. For very young children, or even for school-age children, too many changes in too short a time can be difficult.

When we say *maximize time with each parent* we are not talking about the number of overnights a parent has with their child. It is not the amount of time but what you do with your child when you are together that creates a bond between parent and child. As you begin work on your plan that will minimize transitions for the children while still maximizing time with each parent, it is important for you to consider the following:

- How old is the child?
- How mature is the child?
- What is the child's personality?
- How strong is the child's attachment to each parent?
- Does the child or do the parents have any special needs?
- What are the child's relationships with siblings and friends?
- How flexible are the parents' and child's schedules? What child care arrangements are needed?
- How and where will exchanges take place?
- How will transportation be provided?
- How well can the parents communicate and cooperate?
- Are there any parental fitness concerns, such as domestic violence?

violence, substance abuse, or mental health problems?

- What is each parent's ability and availability to care for the child's needs?

The sections to follow are devoted to providing you with all the information that we could pull together to assist you with knowing what is expected of a child at a particular age with respect to their possible response to divorce. These are all based on the knowledge-base of evidence produced in studies reported in respected social science journals. We begin first with the all-important infants and toddlers and attempt to provide pertinent information about what their needs are and what is recommended for their age group when setting up shared parenting times. We do the same for the small child and the school aged child through adolescence. We provide you with sources of our information and school board web sites from which to obtain school calendars for your planning ease.

Finally, we sincerely hope that the information on this website is helpful for you in putting together your parenting plan. If you have a response that you would like to inform us about, please email the Administrator of the Family Courts, **Ms. Bridget Baker- bakerb@jud8.org** .

Information about ages and stages

INFANTS AND TODDLERS: AGES ZERO TO THREE

Our basic understanding of human infancy has changed dramatically over the last decade, and each set of coparents needs to be aware of this information in order to make informed decisions. Carefully consider the information to determine the recommended options for your child. It is important that you make these decisions with your focus on your child and not on your emotional or financial needs.

Perhaps the most widespread peril children face isn't guns or unprotected swimming pools, or speeding cars. Rather, scientists are suggesting it may be "toxic stress" early in life or even before birth. In a policy statement from the American Association of Pediatricians, based on two decades of research, their report stated that children can be permanently undermined by the presence of toxic stress in early infancy through age 3.

The newborn infant is in the middle of developing his/her brain at hyper-speed.

Divorce researchers tell us that the infant is born with two skills: the ability to suck and the skill to form an attachment through which to get their needs met. They are in survival mode like an animal in the wild and must search out their environment to find food, warmth, comfort and safety. Under many circumstances they will find two parents ready, willing and able to fulfill their every need. These adult caregivers become familiar to this infant and become trusted caregivers. The infant learns "I know I can count on you to be there for me.":

This trust is commonly called an attachment bond. The infant recognizes their caretaker through sight, sound, touch and smell. It is all entirely nonverbal. One scientist refers to it as "communication from one brain to another!" Infants primarily bond with mothers first, especially if she is nursing; however, they may bond with several caregivers over time: Fathers, day care workers, grandparents, nannies, etc. The better the relationship with the mother, the more likely they will form other attachments, i.e. the father.

Once attachments are formed, separation elicits a stress reaction from the baby.

It is important to understand that attachment communication is expressed in

- (1) face-to-face communications : the infant is able to read your face.
- (2) expressions of the emotional tone of the voice; and
- (3) through touch/gestures

Millions of connections are laid down as neural pathways in the brain over the first three years of the infant's life as the infant learns and grows. As stated, if the time and care is put in, there may be several caretakers with whom the baby interacts that he/she may come to trust. Over time these connections are joined by understanding that the attached figures will help the infant to soothe, settle, or calm down from excitement or agitation—in essence to manage his or her emotions. This is the most critical of growth skills of infancy and early childhood. The attachment ability to trust AND the regulation of emotion skills will be in play the rest of his/her life.

So what we have in the attachment relationship is the developing ability of the child to communicate, to trust, and to manage positive and negative emotional states, and both are components of healthy self-esteem. The U.S. National Center for Infants Toddlers and Families defines "infant mental health" as the capacity of a child, from birth to age three, to experience, regulate, and express emotions, form close and secure interpersonal relationships, explore their environments, and learn.

Brain development is not just genetically encoded; it requires these human intimate experiences for its optimal growth. What the child is looking for, and what the child is gaining from the attachment relationship and imprinting into the circuits of its maturing brain are these critical emotional experiences. How those experiences are provided or not provided by the caregivers is going to impact the wiring of the circuits of the infant's brain.

It should therefore be understood that the attachment process is a physical biological process, not just an emotional one.

If you are divorcing or separating when your child is an infant or toddler, it is vital that you come to understand why it is important to consider attachment or learning to trust when you are deciding where your baby will spend his/her days and nights after a split?

- If infant development is interrupted with too much stress, say from a prolonged absence from a primary caregiver, it can have long-lasting effects in the form of an impact on:

- the ability to manage and control feelings,
- focusing skill,
- the ability to multi-task, and
- the ability to develop subsequent relationships around trust.

- Stress studies in young children suggest a very complex story. The human stress hormone is called CORTISOL. The well-cared-baby is fortified or buffered the against stressors so that experiences that might stress the baby by age 12 months--*do not do so*. If the infant is securely attached to his/her mother, for example, stress appears to be successfully handled by the infants studied.

- *When care has been inconsistent, interrupted or neglectful, the infant appears to be without a strategy to deal with stressors and will experience more cortisol reactivity especially when exposed to the removal of the mother or primary caregiver.

The very notion of infants experiencing mental health problems is a disturbing one. We do not like to believe that they grieve over the loss of a loved one. We would rather believe that they quickly forget. While they are relatively resilient, and can and do recover from setbacks, recent findings on brain development suggest that the younger the child is, the more vulnerable they are to adverse experiences. (Wotherspoon, et al. www.cba.org/cba/newsletters/vox-2007)

In light of current scientific findings, it is recommended that coparents be VERY cautious in planning for OVERNIGHTS involving infants. It appears to be extremely important to consider the possible COST to the long-term mental health of the child to proceed with an abundance of caution with time-sharing choices until they have reached the minimum age of 3.

This does not rule out overnights, but it does mean that coparents should be aware of and sensitive to the needs of their infant/toddler. Consider the relationship between the child and any caregiver wishing to schedule overnights and consider the age of the child. Is there a healthy attachment relationship with that caregiver? If not, then the time-sharing plan should focus on **creating the secure attachment before scheduling overnights** --by providing plenty of consistent time for a relationship to develop so that the trust develops for the child with that caregiver.

The focus of any time-sharing plan should be on the relationship. If not, the long term mental health of the child may be at risk. Moreover, coparents who are in high conflict add an even more important risk factor to the mix. Sustained conflict between the coparents is extremely harmful for the infant/toddler's short and long-term mental health.

If the eventual outcome is overnights that are smooth and comfortable for the child, then the time invested in building secure attachments is worth it, as well as learning to shield your child from your hostility toward each other. Healthy attachments can serve as buffers against the effects of adversity (Wotherspoon, et al, 2007).

THREE AND FOUR YEAR OLDS

During this stage of development children begin to understand that you may come and go. Their sense of time is in the process of developing. They are unable to understand much past today or tomorrow. This is important for understanding their ability to tolerate being apart from important people in their lives. They are forming meaningful relationships with more than one adult and are attached to their caregivers. Separation may make them uncomfortable and anxious. They may be fearful about unfamiliar activities and objects. Moving between parents' homes may cause them increased emotional discomfort and become very upset during these times. This behavior doesn't necessarily mean that the other parent is not a good parent or that the child doesn't want to be with that parent.

Exchanges can be made easier on these children by having a predictable schedule and making sure that the parents do not express conflict in front of the children. The most important factors for children of this stage are consistency, predictability and structure.

Children of any age are more likely to resist going to the other parent if there is tension and hostility at the exchange. When there is tension children may become difficult to manage and act out their upset and negative feelings about the conflict. Children may also feel more secure and at ease if they can take a favorite toy, family photos or other objects that will remind them of the other parent.

Children three years of age and older begin to understand the meanings of birthdays and holiday celebrations, Father's Day and Mother's Day. Parenting plans should include opportunities for sharing of these important days.

Three year olds often benefit from structured time with children their own age, away from parents. This allows them to develop social skills and learn that they can be safe and happy away from both parents.

Four year olds are expanding their identities as a boys or girls. They are learning to be able to control their tempers. They are also learning how to get along with other children. Their understanding of what is right and wrong is expanding.

Important factors for children in this age group are consistency, predictability and structure. Research suggests that children in this age group are able to form strong attachments to both parents as well as other adults and caregivers and sustain longer periods of separation from the people to whom they are bonded

When three year and four year olds have a strong bond with both parents, they may able to tolerate up to two consecutive overnights with the non-residential parent. The non-residential parent may increase this bond by spending afternoons and/ or evenings with the child, visiting pre-school, going to the park, etc. If such a bond is not already in place the non-residential parent should have ample daytime opportunity to create such a bond. Such times should include meal time and nap times when possible. Weekend days offer the opportunities for this bonding to occur.

Once a solid connection has been established there can be a gradual introduction of one overnight and then two as seems comfortable for the child. Weekends are the most appropriate time for the introduction of overnights as they usually allow for more flexibility in activity and allow the parent enough time to focus on the child. It is important that both parents support such a plan. Options for gradual weekend overnight time share will be more successful when weekday time share is also occurring. Gradual weekend extension of time share could begin with Saturday morning at 9 until 1 PM with increases every other weekend if the previous times have been successful. When overnights begin they could start in the late morning until the following morning. When a two-overnight schedule begins, it could start after dinner on Friday, and continue to afternoon on Sunday for example.

SAMPLE GRADUATED PARENTING PLANS FOR ZERO TO THREE OR FOUR:

I **F** **BOTH** parents have cared for the child about equally since birth;
BOTH know how to care for the child overnight;
Live close enough that the child does not have a long trip between homes;
Can communicate and cooperate with each other about the care of the child

THEN: parents who qualify can plan for periods of 3-5 hours then an 8-hour visit spaced throughout the week **UNTIL** the child gets comfortable.

 Move to longer day-time stays, ex.: 6 hours accompanied by one overnight per week.

 Move to two six-hour stays accompanied by two consecutive overnights each week.

The coparents may then move to whatever arrangement fits their work schedules and living arrangements. The goal is always to limit the difficulties for the child. This graduated plan for building a bond between parent and child is only for those who can agree. **CAUTION:** Children are at risk of being seriously harmed when parents argue, act disrespectfully and cannot talk to each other about their child.

Note: Vacation times that are much different from the regular parenting time schedule are not recommended unless the parents agree.

FIVE YEAR OLDS

Five year olds have a much better sense of what it is to be a boy or girl than they did at age four. Their relationship with the same sex parent is very important. The child should not feel as if they have driven the same sex parent from the other parent's life.

The five year old child is now faced with the demands of formal school. They are developing work habits and learning how to cooperate in relationships with friends, teacher, and family. Many five year olds wish to participate in extracurricular activities such as team sports, art lessons, or gymnastics. Parents should decide together on the activities and be mindful of not planning activities during the time share with the other parent without getting his or her consent. Children will learn how to cooperate with you and with their teachers by watching you and your co-parent successfully arrange for these activities.

Five year olds often enjoy having other children spend the night. Children should be encouraged to spend the night in both parents' homes, especially during holiday times. Research points out children do best both at home and at school when raised by parents who show both warmth and control. These parents set firm and clear limits, while being responsive, patient and understanding, rather than harsh in their discipline, always giving in, or neglectful. Children in families who are in the second group are more likely to act out, be aggressive and irresponsible. Time-sharing plans that emphasize the limits, warmth and understanding serve the needs of children through their growing years (Whiteside, 1998, Warshak, 2003).

SIX YEAR OLDS

Six year olds need to feel free from family worries in order to cope with school demands, to learn basic class work, to develop good feelings about their ability to work and to learn, to play cooperatively with friends. Children feel good about themselves by achieving success in school and activities, and through friendships. They are developing their ability to think logically, and are beginning to understand the concept of fairness.

They often worry that one parent doesn't like them or feel as if they are losing one of their parents. They may miss the absent parent and feel sad, confused and angry about the divorce. They may also try to get their parents back together.

Some six year olds are more at ease spending more time at one home while others move back and forth with ease. Children differ in how long they are comfortable being away from each parent. Keep in mind when creating a strong parenting plan that the considerations are minimizing transitions for the children, maximizing time with each parent, supporting bonding and attachment with each parent. Parents must be mindful of their work schedules so as to maximize their time with their children. Allowing the co-parent the right of first refusal when one parent is unable to use his or her time share period allows the child maximum time with the other parent. Communication between parents regarding school meetings and activities as well as homework is essential.

SEVEN YEAR OLDS

The seven year old child has now spent two or three years in school. His or her self-concept is now based on mastery and competence especially around school and community activities. They are forming attachments to peers, teachers and others at school. At this stage children want to please their parents and worry about how they compare with other children. They will have more experience with activities and classes outside of school and have understanding of how teams work.

At seven children have a sense of right and wrong. They will still wish their parents would get back together and may continue to make that happen. That is especially true for this age group if the divorce is just getting under way. They still fear losing both parents and may blame themselves for causing the divorce. They will often look sad.

By age seven children can move between homes with less stress than in earlier years. They may be difficult for the first hour or so upon return from their co-parent's and may be homesick

on longer stays. Most children this age need a "home base". That is, one home where they can focus on school work, get information, do homework consistently and have friends easily available. They do best with predictable routines and schedules.

EIGHT YEAR OLDS

The eight year old is starting to "branch out" from his or her parents. More time is spent now working hard in school, hobbies, friendships and community activities. They are more sensitive to being left out by friends. Their emotions are clearer. They are able to talk directly, have some understanding of how other people may feel and are able to accept that their parents are not going to get back together.

At eight children feel more sadness and are more able to express their feelings and worries about being left, having enough to eat and a place to live than at earlier stages. They sometimes feel as if something is wrong with them because of the divorce. It is more common at this stage for children to daydream about their parents getting back together both at home and at school.

Children at this stage need both parents in order to figure out the various roles that men and woman play in families and society. There is also a strong need for a "home base," one home where during the week they can form stable peer and community activities, do homework consistently and feel secure as they work out their feelings. By this age children are more able to work with the same sex parent on hobbies, interests and feelings.

NINE YEAR OLDS

The 9 year old is part child, part independent thinker. Many are over the idea that their parents will get back together, but want the security of a home-base, stable patterns of caretaking, regular contact with each parent, including individual time. They like to have some help in grooming, dressing, remembering, etc. Security lies for them in continuing to master skills to please the parents. Most 9 year olds are not a deep thinkers yet. They like to spend individual time with the same sex parent. The divorce may make them confused and wondering where they belong. They continue to worry about abandonment or having a place to eat and stay. Nine year olds may wonder if somehow they are to blame for the break-up. The 9 year old is likely to believe what is told to them.

Nine year olds may still feel a lot of sadness but may feel more anger especially towards the parent who wants the divorce. A child this age may also feel the need to protect the parent. He or she may feel that one parent is particular needy and that they need to protect that parent. They will even miss out on some of their important activities to stay with their parent. They may withdraw from friends or family. It is important for both parents to be aware of what activities their child is participating in. If a parent notices that all the child is doing is staying on the computer or playing computer games or watching TV, and not playing with their friends it would be time to talk with the child about it or have a counselor at school, therapist or the child's doctor discuss this with them. Nine year olds can also be much more aggressive. If there is an increase in their hitting their brother or sister, fights in school, destroying property, they

may need some help with expressing their anger about what's happening within the family. Kids this age can also have problems with school performance.

Seeing their parents cooperate in dealing with these issues can serve to reassure children that they are important in their parents' lives. Some children will even create issues as a "test" to see if their parents can work together. It is important for parents to be consistent, loving and firm. This will help the children feel secure.

Nine year olds want some assurances from the parent about who will take care of them. They may ask many questions about the divorce and worry about having enough money. For children at this age doing things and mastering them continue to be major ways to feel secure and worthwhile.

TEN AND ELEVEN YEAR OLDS

Ten and eleven year olds do not fantasize as much as younger children about having their parents together again. They may continue to feel closer to one parent, and they want to know more about the divorce and what it means for them.

Parents continue to be more important to a 10 and 11 year old than the peer group, but they are reaching out and mastering skills for self-confidence and approval from parents and peers. They are more able to take care of many of their own needs for food, clothing, hygiene and homework, and want some independence. They may feel a sense of betrayal about the divorce and may have feelings of hurt, sadness and anger. They continue to look for approval from parents and want each parent to have contact with teachers and coaches.

One option for time sharing for this age is:

The Home Base Plan—one coparent has weekdays during the school year. Weekends may be arranged by the coparents, taking into consideration the extra-curricular activities and commitments of the child. Summer time sharing might be reversed for effective relationship building. This enables one parent 75-80 per cent of the time during the school year and the other parent 75 to 80 percent in the summer.

Other schedules may be tried, keeping in mind the continued needs for minimizing transitions, maximizing time with both coparents, and the attachment of the child to each parent.

TWELVE YEAR OLDS

The 12 year old is changing in growth and hormone production. Twelve year olds are beginning to think abstractly and may be more judgmental, opinionated and argumentative. They may be moody and tired. They may show less interest in academic achievement and extra-curricular activities, and more interest in peers and the opposite sex. A close friend may be more of a confidant than either parent. Needs for security and self-esteem may be more satisfied with friends than with parents. Money and chores at each home become issues at this age. They can be "bought" easily by one parent or the other. They may have more to say about the divorce and make moral judgments about a parent.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE OLDER CHILD

The opinions of the 13 to 18 year old should be considered when making decisions about time sharing. Sometimes this becomes a burden to children, who believe that expressing an opinion that may be seen as favoring one parent over the other. They may decide that just keeping quiet is best for them and these decisions must be respected. On the other hand, some children of these ages believe that they have the right to make the decision for themselves regarding their time sharing. This is *not legally* true until they reach age 18 and children need to know this.

Children sometimes become resentful of their parents if they see that divorce has caused financial problems for their families. They also are very vulnerable to outside influences. These influences make it easier for a child to pit one parent against the other, and aware parents are on the lookout for these influences.

Parenting plans that promote the middle and high school child's participation in academic and extracurricular activities, even when that activity means giving up some time with the child, strengthens the relationship with the child. The child learns that the parent respects his or her decisions. Shared time and involvement in everyday activities are helpful to children as they talk with their parents about their interests. An extra night or two with the parent not on the schedule for that night does not hurt the relationship. It does, in fact, help with the relationships with both parents.

Boys at these ages are more likely to have behavioral problems if they have less time with their fathers. But when mothers and fathers both participate actively in their children's lives and monitor their behavior, these boys' behavior was similar to those of intact families.

Research findings indicate that the amount of contact is not as important for older children as the quality of the contact with the parent who has less time with the child. It is important that the child has overnight contact with the parent with whom he spends less time so that they can do routine activities together and have free time just to spend with each other.

It has been shown that when there is cooperation and support between parents after divorce, children are the better for it. When a parent encourages the relationship between the child and the other parent, the relationships of each parent and the child are better. When children spend more nights with a non-resident parent, they report that they have better relationships with both parents.

In Summary

We hope you will find the above information helpful as you decide how you will restructure your family as you all move forward. We are aware some pieces will "fit" better for you than others. Please take what will work for you as you work to minimize the transitions your child(ren) will have to make while at the same time maximizing the time each parent can spend with the children. Doing this will help both parents form firm bonds that will be helpful for the kids, now and in the future.

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Websites

<http://www.sbac.edu> Consult this website for annual school calendars in order to map out your scheduling of holidays observed locally in Alachua County. Dates for the state-wide mandatory testing are set in the Spring by the Florida Dept. of Education. These should be considered by your parenting plans.

*Florida will transition from FCATs and End-of-Course Exams to a new assessment in 2014-15.

*All private schools and schools in neighboring counties have websites for yearly calendars as well.

Parenting Plan Template

http://www.flcourts.org/gen_public/family/forms_rules/995a.pdf

THE FAMILY WIZARD, TWO FAMILIES NOW, GOOGLE CALENDAR Suggested resources for assistance with calendars, communications and additional resources for support in a smooth-running parenting plan.

FLAFCC.org The website of an inter-disciplinary professional group whose mission is to provide education about family law processes and support for families in transition. The parent organization AFCC (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts) is also an excellent source of information and support.

www.azcourts.gov/portals/31/parentingTime/PPWguidelines.pdf The website of the Arizona child-focused guidelines for parenting plans. The team of mental health professionals who put together this document used this guide as a basis. It is much longer and contains a great deal of information about sample parenting time plans.