



*Don't think of time ticking on a clock, but nurturance, understanding, guidance, discipline, and play*

# All Parenting Plans Are Not Equal

BY MARSHA KLINE PRUETT

*Parenting plans* are about each parent's desire for access to his or her children and an opportunity to be involved in the activities and responsibilities of parenting. The plans are all about time—how much and when. What parents often forget is that young children's sense of time is very different from their own adult perspective.

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Young children have no understanding of what a day or a week means. Infants have no sense of time, as long as they get fed, diapered, and prepared for bed when they are hungry, soiled, or tired. Days can feel like years to toddlers or preschoolers, and they don't understand what it means to have one more or less day with one parent to balance out time with the other.

Young children “forget” about their connections to significant adults between visits; they need a little time to refamiliarize themselves and feel comfortable in a place or with a person they haven't seen on a regular and frequent basis. It is because of this sense of time and children's need to reestablish levels of comfort during each new encounter with a loved one that professionals question the idea that children should spend most of their time with one caregiver and see the other parent/caregiver relatively infrequently.

In fact, young children should have more frequent transitions between caregivers when they can do so with minimal discomfort. This allows the child to become more familiar with the secondary caregiver, experiencing him or her as a stable and predictable part of



## Parenting Plans for Young Children

- 1. Consistency matters more than an extra night.** Try to keep schedules the same from week to week, especially during the week. This makes young children more comfortable by establishing a rhythm, and slightly older children more content in knowing where they will be tomorrow, next week, and next month.
- 2. Too many transitions take a toll on youngsters.** Build transitions around natural breaks in a child's life, such as going to daycare or school. Avoid transitions that take place after dinner or when a child is tired, a notoriously fragile time for most youngsters.
- 3. Put the burden on parents, not children.** Parents should do most of the juggling, traveling, dealing with awkward scheduling and schedule changes. Parenting plans should not be designed primarily for parents' convenience. For example, one option is to have parents "birdnesting" (moving in and out of the home in which the children live) for a time. This helps parents understand first-hand what they are asking their children to do.
- 4. Research shows that parenting plans that involve issues such as overnights and consistency of schedules are more closely related to fathers' views** of children's behavioral outcomes than to mothers' and to the family's legal outcomes (the cost and litigiousness of the divorce).
- 5. Children with siblings need one-on-one time with parents.** Much of family life consists of one parent staying with or driving a child in one direction, while the other heads off with another child in a different direction. This one-on-one time allows parents to key in to each child's developmental needs and temperament. After divorce, most parenting plans move children en masse from house to house.

If the plan were designed to organize life more like an intact family, each parent would have one-on-one time with each child, and children would have more alone time for refueling in relative peace. Some parents don't like such structure because it cuts into their personal time to pursue interests, careers, or new relationships. But personal time is a rare luxury for parents. Parenting is a full-time commitment. It is tiring, and often draining—not always rewarding—but part of the complete package. Free time is not a privilege of divorce.

— M.K.P.

of infants and toddlers relates more to erratic schedules than to overnight transitions. Likewise, when mothers are anxious about their young child's (under age three) overnights during the week, such anxiety can become a source of a child's distress as well, according to the child's father. Whether a mother should be helped to manage her distress, or overnights with the other parent curtailed until the child is older, again will depend on whether the mother can tolerate it without passing on her worry to the child to a greater extent than is good for the child.

### Quality time with fathers

As parenting plans are established, each parent usually wants to spend "quality time" with the children. The key is to focus on what quality time means. Fathers tend to spend less time in direct childcare activities and may find themselves fighting for more time than their divorcing spouse is willing to cede. Research shows that the amount of time a father spends with his child matters less than the quality of his involvement. Quality involvement is sensitive to the child's needs, based on the parent's understanding of the child's developmental stage and personality.

Clinical wisdom also shows that many men view involvement as attending daily activities that center around drop-off at childcare, bedtime routines, sick days, and other times that include more caregiving than normal weekend activities. Such involvement appears to promote the father's sense of paternal responsibility, authority, and sense of inclusion—all of which result in more nurturing and structured caregiving, which is essential to optimal parenting. Children respond favorably to such warm and "authoritative" parenting throughout childhood, but especially in toddlerhood when they are struggling to achieve autonomy and independence.

Children don't really think about quality time. They don't talk to parents when parents have four hours to spend

the child's care. Research has established that even the youngest children are capable of developing multiple important attachments (two to three in infancy) and that frequent transitions do not work well when parents are in conflict. Conflict between parents during transitions undermines their ability to provide consistent care for the child's biological and psychological needs.

In the absence of such conflict, children develop best in a stable environment, but that stability should include

involvement with both parents when they are available, interested, and nurturing caregivers. Establishing a balance between frequent contact with both parents and providing a stable environment will depend on the unique characteristics and circumstances of the family.

In addition to transitions, parenting plans often become tangled up in issues of overnights for young children. My own research shows that in families with low to moderate stress, the distress

with them; they talk when they are making transitions, feeling particularly relaxed or anxious, or stalling to stretch bedtimes out a little longer. If they do not see both parents on a regular and frequent (weekly) basis, they feel it deeply. Children want each parent around to help them grow and take delight in their daily achievements or offer support for their small and large disappointments.

Parents should not emphasize absolutes in parenting time but devise a plan that enables both parents to feel and act engaged and responsible. That typically requires extended periods of togetherness over weekend-weekday transitions. Parents then learn that they can handle the good, the bad, and the ugly moments of parenting, and children trust that each parent can handle whatever happens.

The desire for a 50-50 time split arises out of parents' sense of loss from the divorce, not from children's needs. Children are rarely parented "equally." Mothers still do the lion's share of housework, scheduling, and administrative family tasks. Do not get bogged down in arguments about equal time. It may count in terms of child support, but there are other ways to make support palatable to both parties.

The "approximation rule" structures parenting plans based on how much time each parent spent with the child during the marriage. The idea is for the child's relationship with each parent to remain consistent after the divorce. Such a concept ignores one essential fact of family life: that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. You cannot divide a marital family's life by the same denominator as a divorced

family's life. The rules have changed, and so has the whole system.

**D**uring the first two years of life, children may prefer one parent over the other for a time. Typically, a one-year-old child in the presence of both parents will seek out his mother for comfort; by age one and a half, gender becomes less important and the child seeks comfort from either parent; from two to two and a half years old, the child may prefer to be comforted by his father.

During the first years of life, a child shifts from being driven primarily by a need for comforting and safety to a desire to venture out into the wider world. She notices Father's ability to come and go and have adventures away

## Tips on Shared Parenting



- **Don't get caught in the 50/50 trap.** Don't confuse equal time with equal relationships. Set up your plan to minimize unnecessary transitions between homes and the amount of time and energy required by back and forths. Try letting children stay longer in one place, with a parent moving in and out of the child's world, for example, picking up and taking a child to music class and then dropping him off again.
- **Plan one-on-one time.** Develop your plan so that each parent spends some one-on-one time with each child and total parenting time equals or exceeds what was spent prior to the divorce.
- **Listen to what matters to your child.** Make sure your plan fits your child's temperament and activities, even if it means that one parent spends less time with the child than the parent wants. Be attentive to your child's behaviors. Build fairness between parents in the long term, rather than the short term.
- **Be honest about a child's preferences at different developmental stages.** Take the competition out of

parenting by viewing a child's favoritism as evidence of normal development. If the skew begins to feel like a schism, have a fallback plan to shore up the less-favored parent's time with the child and reestablish balance.

- **Moms—shore up dads' influence.** With most young children and in cases of older children in which moms have the primary parenting role, moms have an easier time maintaining relationships with their children after divorce. It is critical to establish a plan that allows dads ample weekday and nighttime access. Otherwise, your child loses the positive influence and benefits of having Dad involved in his or her life.
- **Dads—don't push for equal over involved.** It is fathers' desires to stay involved and their fears of being left out of a child's life on a regular basis that often spur conflicts regarding parenting plans. These conflicts can intensify in level and length as fathers dig in their heels. Put your energies into accepting that the change toward a more balanced access plan may take time. It may never be equal. Your child won't keep score if you don't. What a child needs to know is that you are available, interested, and knowledgeable about his or her interests, activities, and needs and that you want to be part of every aspect of your child's life. Your child needs to know too that you will not give up on continuing to be part of his or her day-to-day life.

— M. K. P.



*What matters most* is whether parents are responsive when a change is needed and adjustments can be made to accommodate optimal sharing now and in the future.

from and aside from Mother. She wants a part of that and, thus, identifies with Father's role in the outside world. Father has a different way of comforting than Mother, and it fits with this mood and desire for exploration. As the child becomes more interested in shaking off the hurt and returning to play and mastery, Father's way of comforting becomes preferable.

This works for a little while, but preferences will shift many times as the child grows older. As young children become more sophisticated in social relationships, they learn quickly that Mom is best for some needs and Dad for others. A preference for one parent over the other is evident in adolescence, too, as many children in shared custody situations move to the other household for a time; perhaps to get what the teen wants from the "easier" parent, but often out of a healthier realization that one parent's style or relationship works better at certain stages of development. The strengths of each parent may relate a bit to gender, but far more on who each parent is and what he or she does best or cares about most. For example, a child may need more structure, flexibility, stimulation, a slower pace, or to be nearer or further from peer influences, and so on.

**I**n competitive sports, we track touchdowns, points scored, and records broken. But within teams, the focus is on what each person contributes to the group's optimal functioning. The same goes for families. The burdens of parenting are unevenly distributed, especially early in a child's life. But

over time, the balance shifts, and things equal out. What matters most is whether parents are responsive when a change is needed and whether adjustments can be made to accommodate optimal sharing now and in the future.

If children designed the rules of post-divorce parenting, they would count what each parent offers in terms of nurturance and understanding, guidance, discipline, and play—not hours in a day. If your children's interests were the yardstick of success, would your parenting plan be different?

### Parenting plan in "real" time

Family members should not be left to twist in the wind while the court process grinds on. It is fine to make a temporary plan with built-in reevaluation later. Insisting on a permanent parenting plan ignores a cardinal rule of child development: children change rapidly and unpredictably. Rather than relying on a rigid schedule just to keep the family out of court, make a plan that incorporates "room to grow" but includes very specific ways to modify the plan without returning to court. This includes choosing a therapist or mediator to help with transitions when family dynamics change.

It helps for parents to designate ahead of time a trusted professional

who can make a preventative "visit." Just as we go to doctors for a regular check-up to identify small health problems before they get worse, a parenting plan check-up can be useful in building in the expectation that things will evolve, especially over the first years after divorce.

**L**et's say that Mom has been much more involved on a daily basis than Dad, and she isn't sure she trusts him to adequately and sensitively meet the child's needs. A parenting plan can call for fewer overnights for a specified period of time, such as six months, and then a modification can be built in that allows for increasingly more time during the week. A move toward parity builds up slowly and steadily. Then Dad, who is afraid that fewer overnights now will mean fewer in the future can begin to trust that as his spouse gets used to the change in family status and works through losing some time and autonomy over parenting, he can build up a relationship with his children that ensures everyone's comfort levels when the children are spending more time away from Mom. **FA**

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