

## **Children's Needs: Developmental and Timesharing Considerations**

### **1. Birth to six months**

#### **Children's needs**

- Good quality care, smooth and consistent routine, quick and nurturing response to distress
- To have all of their physical needs met and regular medical attention
- Social and emotional interaction with caregivers (hugs, talking to baby, smiles, holding, rocking, playing)
- Frequent contact with both parents
- Low levels of conflict between the parents/low levels of stress
- Parents/caregivers who are supportive of each other in their baby's care and who are emotionally available to attend to baby's needs

#### **Developmental tasks**

- Major task is to learn to trust
- Learning to love and "attaching" to their caregivers
- Attention on physical needs being met

#### **Possible experience during parents' separation**

- Due to complete dependency on parents, baby is stressed if parents are not able to care for them
- Baby is able to sense parents' distress
- Is distressed if needs not met consistently, if caregivers change frequently or if the routine changes often

#### **Behaviours that indicate distress**

- May cry more, seem upset, fidgety
- May not learn new things like vocalizing (making sounds), reaching for things, sitting up, crawling
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- May become very quiet, limp, unresponsive especially when needs are not attended to over prolonged period and medical attention is required
- May not grow as they should and medical attention is required

#### **Time sharing considerations**

- Daily contact or every other day is ideal, as long as baby is not exposed to conflict
- Can manage longer periods of time with important caregivers when contact is more frequent
- Short, regular overnights can be considered provided parents lived together before the separation and there are no concerns of parenting
- Temperament (physical rhythms) must also be considered as some infants need to learn how to fall asleep and it may take some time before parents find out what rituals or routines work

## 2. Six months to eighteen months

- Have basically all the same needs and behaviours
- Same time-sharing considerations apply
- Some children in this age group begin to experience some “separation anxiety” i.e. not liking to leave a parent’s home
- A child may have more difficulty going from one parent to the other, especially if the child does not have consistent contact with one parent

## 3. Parents who have never lived together

Parents who have never lived together and have little or no history with each other as parents, or where a parent has little experience, but is willing to learn;

- Short and frequent contacts several times a week for children is recommended
- When the child is comfortable, the time could be increased to full days and then to an overnight
- This may take several months to a year to occur
- For overnights to be appropriate for the child all the same factors apply, such as having similar routines, low conflict/keeping conflict away from the child, safely sharing information about the child’s needs; responsible lifestyle choices or access to appropriate family/ child care environment to support good parenting efforts and to build trust

## 4. Age eighteen months to three years

### Children’s needs

- A safe, trustworthy base from which to explore
- Reassurance, to know that they are loved, will be taken care of
- Lots of affection, do not force if child is pulling away
- Parents’ understanding when acting out their upset and not be punished for “acting like a baby”
- Parents to be patient, flexible and can follow the child’s lead
- Good boundaries and limits and for parents to stick to them
- Smooth and consistent routine is still important
- Good supervision

### Developmental tasks

- Major task is to become “their own person”
- Need to explore away from parents
- Wants to be individual, but still wants to feel safe and know they are taken care of

### Possible experiences during parents’ separation

- Children become anxious if exposed to conflict, they are good at noticing it
- Most children cannot explain how they feel and may act out frustration
- Children still highly dependent on parents and may be afraid that they won’t be taken care of or that both parents will leave them

### Behaviours that indicate distress

- Regressive behaviours such as acting younger than their age i.e. wanting to wear a diaper again, more “baby” attention, to sleep in crib again or with a parent
- May be clinging, whining, crying
- May appear sad, lonely and will pull away from people
- May become more fearful of common things
- May have more nightmares
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- May show more distress before and after transition periods
- May show aggressive behaviours, especially if aggression has been witnessed

### **Time-sharing considerations**

- Still prefer their familiar caregivers and frequent contact with both parents
- Children should not go longer than 3 or 4 days without contact from either parent
- Children can manage overnights when contact is consistent and reliable
- Full weekends might be stressful
- Sharing the weekends and several times per week for shorter periods more suitable if conflict between parents is low or kept away from the children

## **5. Age three to five years**

### **Children’s needs**

- Lots of reassurance that the separation was not their fault
- To be reassured that they are loved and that nothing will ever change that
- Have a strong need for physical contact and not forced physical contact
- A regular routine in terms of attending the same daycare, bedtime, time with family and friends
- To know when you’ll be seeing them again and to give verbal information and set up calendars the children can check in each home
- Encouragement to talk about their feelings
- Help talking about what scares them
- Approval by telling them what they are doing right
- Parents’ understanding when they are acting out their distress and not be punished
- Parents who are patient, warm, flexible and can follow the children’s lead
- Good boundaries, limits and supervision

### **Developmental tasks**

- Major task is intellectual development and learning many new skills
- Development of conscience and knowledge of right and wrong and ability to feel guilt
- Thinking is egocentric as they think that they are the cause of things
- Play is everything, their thinking is “magical” and fantasy seems real

### **Possible experiences during parents’ separation**

- Children of this age think they are “the center of the universe”, that they cause things to happen, and therefore can feel very guilty about the separation or for their parents’ upset
- Children may feel confused and question whether they can trust anything to stay the same ever again
- May be afraid that when a parent leaves to go to work, they will never come back
- Separation anxiety becomes an issue again
- May dwell on things that frighten them such as being left alone or a parent dying
- Will often try to wish the separation away
- May pretend that the separation has not happened and think, “We all live in a big, beautiful house”.

### **Behaviours that indicate distress**

- May say that they caused the separation
- May try and be very good to reverse the separation
- May attempt to control the situation and starts organizing everything as a way to create a sense of security
- As with younger children, regressive behaviours may occur
- May stop playing with friends
- May appear sad and lonely, frightened or confused
- May lose their sense of fun
- May show more aggressive behaviours, especially if aggression has been witnessed;
- Some behaviors may be specific to gender/socialization, i.e.
  - some children might turn anger inward and become overly quiet, depressed, sulky; others might direct anger outward such as bullying, fighting

### **Time sharing considerations**

- Needs a very predictable schedule and to be constantly reminded of when they’ll be doing what and with whom
- Needs both parents involved on a regular basis, frequent contact is preferred, if conflict between parents is kept away
- Can manage parenting plans that include full weekends with each parent
- Can tolerate a shared care schedule without being away for more than 3 or 4 days from a parent
- Some resilient 5 year olds can manage five days between contacts
- Can manage week long periods away from one parent for the purposes of holidays, as long as this does not happen too often
- Longer than one week away from either parent is not recommended

## **6. Ages six to nine**

### **Children’s needs**

- Parents to show understanding, acceptance and warmth
- Parents to help them talk about feelings or problems
- Parents to say good things about each other and not share negative feelings about the other parent
- Permission from each parent to love their other parent
- Each parent to spend as much time as possible with them
- Alone time with each parent especially if re-partnered
- Active parenting by both parents means involvement in school, activities, providing emotional support
- Children need reasonable expectations, limits, fair and consistent discipline

### **Developmental tasks**

- Major task is intellectual development, understanding cause and effect, and the ability to organize concepts
- Major skill development occurs

### **What children may experience when parents separate**

- Children may feel that they are being rejected by both parents
- Extreme sadness is common, along with guilt, anger and loneliness
- Longing for the parent they are not with
- Increased possessiveness of parents and the idea of new partners for parents can be frightening
- Children may feel they do not have enough time with either parent
- Children may see everyone else as having more than they do

### **Behaviours that indicate distress**

- May cry often
- May deny their feelings
- Spends more time alone
- May have difficulty concentrating at school
- May test parents' love by acting out
- May show more fear and anxiety by biting nails, stomach aches and headaches
- Children who are very distressed may have suicidal fantasies
- Children who have witnessed aggression, may also behave aggressively

### **Time sharing considerations**

- Children are content when they have maximum contact with both parents
- Children can manage longer periods of time away from each parent but no more than 5 days
- Children eight years and older can manage every other week
- Children can manage longer periods of time away from parents for holiday purposes, as long as they have contact with the other parent

## **7. Ages nine to twelve**

### **Children's needs**

- To know that parents can take care of themselves and that they have friends or counselors to talk to so children does not need to be the ones responsible
- To know that they are not being asked to choose between parents and that they should not choose or not be involved in the separation or adult discussions
- Permission to still “be a kid”
- Encouragement to stay involved in activities with their friends such as playdates, sleepovers etc.
- Needs parents to work with their schedule and to know who their friends are
- Permission to love both parents
- Permission to talk to parents and others about their feelings
- Parents need to stay aware of and monitor what is happening with schoolwork and friends

### **Developmental tasks**

- Children need to grow more independent from parents
- Children develop sense of justice and a code of ethics, they tend to see everything as black and white and dislike ‘grey areas’
- Children’s sexuality is awakening and aware of changes in own body, aware of opposite sex and identify more with parent of same sex

### **What children may experience when parents separate**

- May feel that they need to choose between parents
- May feel conflict over what they want for themselves as opposed to what they want for others
- May feel intense anger which may be directed toward the parent they feel caused the separation
- May feel ashamed or embarrassed about the family situation
- May worry about parents, whether they are going to be o.k.
- May become overly responsible and take on adult roles
- May feel rejected by the one or both parents
- May have a shaken sense of identity

### **Behaviours that indicate distress**

- May act like the divorce is no big deal
- Ability to concentrate may be decreased
- May act out in school
- May worry about a variety of issues such as being forgotten or abandoned, becoming a burden, having their needs overlooked and what will happen if a parent dies
- May become sexually active
- Some children may become aggressive, if they have witnessed aggression or are not seeing enough of their other parent
- Some children may try very hard to please which can be mistakenly viewed as a good thing.
- Extremely distressed children may attempt suicide

### **Time-sharing considerations**

- Children can manage longer periods away from each parent such as every other week
- Parents need to consider the child's activity schedule
- Children's activities should not interfere with relationship with either parent
- Children's own ideas should be considered; however parents must make final decision
- Children with a close relationship to their same gendered parent, may need more time

## 8. Ages thirteen to eighteen

### Children's needs

- Parents to show how to manage feelings in a healthy and positive way, to have good anger management and good conflict management skills
- Encouragement to talk about their own feelings so they do not experience a sense of embarrassment which may cause them to assume an "I don't care attitude".
- To be encouraged to take care of themselves
- Parents to take care of themselves and to talk with other adults about their feelings and not use children for emotional support
- Love, encouragement and support
- To have time with each parent as well as time for their own schedule. Parents need to be creative about spending time with teens.
- Parents to understand if they spend more time at one parent's home than the other's, it is not because they do not love that parent, but may have to do with the other parent's home is closer to friends, school or activities
- Parents to keep parenting and not treat children as a best friend
- Parents to keep intimate relationships private because children are not ready to view parents as sexual beings

### Developmental tasks

- Major task is to break away and to become their own person
- Learn to understand realities of life
- Their brain is still developing morally and emotionally and will not be fully developed until the age of 25

### What children may experience when parents separate

- May think their behaviour caused the separation
- May feel neglected or rejected and sometimes see separation as proof that parents don't really love them
- May feel embarrassed by separation
- May feel angry, resentful towards parents for messing with their lives
- May feel frightened by parents' neediness
- May have feelings of loss regarding their view of what a family is supposed to look like
- May feel fearful of the future and their own ability to maintain a relationship
- May feel anxious about leaving home

## **Behaviours that indicate distress**

- May become distant or withdrawn
- May become extremely critical of parents
- May lose interest in activities or their friends
- May avoid home, threaten to leave or run away
- May delay own goals or afraid to leave home
- May act out such as increased sexual behaviour, substance abuse, suspensions from school, drop in school performance, physical fighting, arguments with friends, self-harming behaviours, trouble with the law

## **Time-sharing considerations**

- Requires less time with each parent
- Some may need less overnight time with opposite gendered parent
- Needs parents to create a “sense of home” in both homes otherwise may have difficulty spending longer periods of time
- Consideration for a youth’s employment and other activities may impact the schedule
- A young person’s wishes should be considered; however parents must make the final decision

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References: Developmental Considerations handout. For the Sake of the Children. Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 1997.

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## OPTIONS FOR TIMESHARING

There are many ways children spend time with parents following a separation. In general, children do better and are more content if they can have as much contact as possible with each parent if the relationship is a safe, healthy and positive one.

Listed below are a number of timesharing options parents may wish to consider depending on their children's age and stage of development.

### 1. Infant and toddler

#### Plan A

- Parents who lived together prior to separation
  - Secure attachment to both parents
  - Both parents have just as much involvement in caregiving
- Primary care with one parent and frequent contact with the other parent to include overnights and extended time

Tuesday 4:00 to 7:00 p.m., Thursday 4:00 to 7:00 p.m.  
Saturday 10 a.m. overnight to Sunday 10 a.m.

Tuesday 5:00 p.m. overnight to Wednesday 8:00 a.m.  
Saturday 5:00 p.m. overnight to Sunday 5:00 p.m.

Wednesday 5:00 to 8:00 p.m.  
Saturday 5:00 p.m. overnight until Monday 8:00 a.m.

Friday 5:00 p.m. overnight until Sunday 5:00 p.m.  
Saturday 5:00 p.m. overnight to Sunday 5:00 p.m.

#### Plan B

- Parents have not lived together
  - When both parents are not involved in just as much caregiving
- Primary care with one parent and frequent contact with the other parent with no overnights until later on
- One to three weekly contacts of 2-3 hours in neutral or supportive setting over a period of many months
  - Primary caregiver should share all information with regards to infant activities, soothing, feeding routines, favorite toys, health issues
  - Positive and open communication is important
  - When children are comfortable, parenting time can be extended to full days and then overnight access after one year
  - If children experiencing separation anxiety such as crying and clinging, this is considered to be normal and may be most intense from 15 to 24 months old
  - Children need verbal reassurance from both parents, without blaming or conflict

### When conflict is high

- Transitions should occur at daycare or with a third party

- Parents should have a highly detailed parenting plan
- Parents should use a notebook or third party to communicate

## 2. Children of pre-school and school age

### Plan A

Primary care with one parent and every other weekend with the other parent  
Friday 6:00 p.m. to Sunday 6:00 p.m.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	A	A	B	B
A	A	A	A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A	A	B	B
A	A	A	A	A	A	A

- 12 days separation from a parent far too long for many children
- Children's relationship with other parent becomes less important to children over time
- Parent is less involved in school and homework
- Primary care parent has little time off from parenting
- May need to be used for practical reasons, when parents live far apart and have limited resources.
- Daily or frequent contact could be maintained with phone calls or use of Face Time, Skype
- May be beneficial when a parent has angry, rigid or inconsistent parenting style
- 4 overnights vs 24 overnights in 4 week period

### Plan B

Primary care with one parent and every other weekend with mid-week contact with the other parent  
Friday 6:00 p.m. to Sunday 6:00 p.m.  
Wednesday 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	A   B   A	A	A/B	B
B/A	A	A	A   B   A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A   B   A	A	A/B	B
B/A	A	A	A   B   A	A	A	A

- Separation from each parent is no more than 6 days
- Parents describe midweek contact as too rushed and no time to settle back in
- Parent has little time for a regular routine, rushed
- May be only option when parent has early work hours
- 4 overnights vs 24 overnights in a 4 week period

**Plan C**

Primary care with one parent and every other weekend overnight to Monday morning with the other parent

Friday 6:00 p.m. to Monday morning

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	A	A	A/B	B
B	B/A	A	A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A	A	A/B	B
B	B/A	A	A	A	A	A

- Weekend is more expanded for parent and children
- Parent drops children off at school or day care
- Opportunity for parent conflict reduced with neutral transition locations
- One less transition for the children
- Not workable if a parent lives too far from children’s school
- 11 days of separation from a parent less ideal for a younger aged children
- May need to be considered for some high conflict situations
- 6 overnights vs 22 overnights

**Plan D**

Primary care with one parent and every other weekend overnight to Sunday morning with the other parent and an overnight mid-week.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	B	A	B	B
A	A	A	B	A	A	A
A	A	A	B	A	B	B
A	A	A	B	A	A	A

- Separation from a parent no more than 6 days
- Parent involved in homework during midweek
- Transition at school avoids Wednesday evening conflict
- Parent has opportunity for bedtime and waking rituals
- Primary care parent has regular, weekly evening off
- Can add Monday evening contact after weekends with primary care parent
- 8 overnights vs 20 overnights.

**Plan E**

Primary care with one parent and every other weekend overnight to Monday morning with the other parent and an overnight mid-week.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	B	A	B	B
B	B/A	A	B	A	A	A
A	A	A	B	A	B	B
B	B/A	A	B	A	A	A

- Longer weekend
- With additional 2 overnights on weekends
- Parent assumes more responsibility for schoolwork
- Opportunities for face-to-face parent conflict in front of children removed if use school or day care for pickups and drop offs
- 10 overnights vs 18 overnights

**Plan F**

Shared care arrangement - children are in each parent's care for 12 overnights in a 4 week period

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	B	A	B	B
B	B	A	B	A	A	A
A	A	A	B	A	B	B
B	B	A	B	A	A	A

- Longer weekend
- With additional 2 overnights on weekends
- Parent assumes more responsibility for schoolwork
- Opportunities for face-to-face parent conflict in front of children removed if use school or day care for pickups and drop offs
- 12 overnights vs 18 overnights

**Plan G**

Equal care arrangement for younger preschool aged children called "2, 2, 3".

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	B	B	A	A	B	B
B	A	A	B	B	A	A
A	B	B	A	A	B	B
B	A	A	B	B	A	A

- No separation from parents greater than 3 days
- More transitions

- More appropriate for preschool children
- More often an interim schedule until children are 5 or 6 years old
- Helpful if parents need to use day care or school for transitions to keep conflict low
- 14 overnights vs 14 overnights

**Plan H**

Equal care arrangement for younger preschool aged children called “2, 2, 3”.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
B	B	B	A	A	B	B
A	A	A	B	B	A	A
B	B	B	A	A	B	B
A	A	A	B	B	A	A

- Parents are able to manage weekend transitions without upset
- 14 overnights vs 14 overnights

**Plan I**

Equal care arrangement called “2, 2, 5, 5”.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
B	A	A	B	B	A	A
A	A	A	B	B	B	B
B	A	A	B	B	A	A
A	A	A	B	B	B	B

- All transitions at school or day care avoids conflict
- Consistent midweek residence each week
- Five days between contacts is OK for some children ages 5 and up
- Easier on children if they can have contact with their other parent during the 5 days such as an activity.
- Both parents fully involved in children’s schoolwork and play
- Children generally more satisfied with shared arrangements
- May not work for children with difficult temperaments, learning disabilities or other special needs
- 14 overnights vs 14 overnights

**Plan J.**

Equal care arrangement called “One week on and off”.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
A	A	A	A	A	B	B
B	B	B	B	B	A	A
A	A	A	A	A	B	B
B	B	B	B	B	A	A

- 7 day separation is difficult for children younger than 6 or 7 years old
- Removes face-to-face parental conflict
- Least amount of transitions per month
- Parent and children can “settle” into routine
- Change in residence each week may complicate lessons, daycare arrangements
- Parents need to be able to work together to ensure that their children’s academic needs and friendships are attended to and supported
- 14 overnights vs. 14 overnights

Kelly, J.B. Ph.D., “Marital Discord and Children: Current Research & Implications for Practice”, Presentation to The Law Society Of Manitoba and Family Mediation Manitoba, 2002.

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## **MEDIUM TO LONG DISTANCE PARENTING PLAN OPTIONS**

### **1. Parenting Plans after a Move Away: For Infants and Toddlers**

- Monthly contact important and ideal
- With long distance, at least 3-4 stays a year
- Stays limited to 3-5 days, not weeks
- If parents shared care prior to move, children may manage longer times with their other parent
- Longer periods of care/separations may be tolerated if older siblings present and supportive
- Separations of 5-7 days usually/can be tolerated by age 3

### **2. For Preschool Children: Ages 3-5**

- Contact with their other parent 4-6 times/year can work, more if distances are shorter
- Use some (but not all) school/statutory holidays
- In summer, instead of a month care period, 2 or 3 blocks of 7-10 days are preferable
- Parent comes to children's location once in summer and once in school year
- Children has 1-3 scheduled phone contacts with the parent they live with during their week away

### **3. Summer Scheduling for School Aged Children**

- 6-7 years: 9-14 day blocks, two times in the summer if possible (not one long stretch)
- 8-12 years: 4-6/8 weeks, two blocks of time if possible for younger group
- Allow for special activities (camp, etc.)
- Period of care with other parent starts 1-2 weeks after school is out, returning to primary parent 1-2 weeks before school starts
- Regular communication with primary parent

### **4. Scheduling Issues for Adolescents**

- Get their input into planning time and activities with a parent
- Allow for 1-2 weeks with primary parent (peers) at beginning and end of summer
- Honor important adolescent activities
- Have a friend join them for some time

### **5. General Scheduling Issues**

- Age and close relationship with a parent key factor in length(s) of stay
- Build in gradual steps for increased time especially for young children
- Parent should travel to children's location once or twice each year
- Hotels are fine for contacts (if affordable)
- Alternate important holidays each year
- Balance children's weekend activities with competing need for involved parent
- International moves likely to involve one care period

- Transporting younger children more costly (need an escort)
- Mediation can be helpful to sort out issues such as: frequency, length, location of contacts and who makes the trips; age related schedule changes; details of travel; communication between children and parents

## **6. Communication between Children and Parent**

- Regular phone contacts
- Email – in high conflict situations, children and adolescents have separate accounts
- Scan drawings/school reports, awards, projects, pictures for their parent
- Video chats are especially good for young children
- With infrequent contact and younger children, make videos of children doing something together with the away parent