

Share the care

Parenting plan

Collaborative parenting apart



Relationships[™]
AUSTRALIA

Authors

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We acknowledge throughout this resource we have used the language of 'parents', and intend for this term to be understood as interchangeable with other significant persons who are carers and non-biological parents involved in the decisions relating to parenting arrangements and plans.



We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work, and we pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging.

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About parenting plans



Why a parenting plan?

Divorce and separation are painful for everyone involved—particularly children. At this challenging time, children need support, love and contact with parents, carers and significant others in their lives.

Some certainty about the future is also very important for everyone. A written parenting plan, worked out between parents, will help clarify the arrangements you need to put in place to care for your children. The plan might include how parents intend to make parenting decisions into the future and time children spend with their parents. It will help everyone involved to know what is expected of them and it will be a valuable reference as time passes and circumstances change.

What is a parenting plan?

A parenting plan is a written agreement between parents covering practical issues of parental responsibility. A parenting plan puts the best interests of the children first. It is drawn up in good will with a shared commitment to your children and their future firmly in mind.

A parenting plan is not legally enforceable; however, it can have legal implications. See 'Parenting plans and the law' on page 6.

What is not covered in a parenting plan?

A parenting plan does not cover how you intend to divide up your cash, homes and assets. You should discuss these matters with a mediator or lawyer who assists with property settlements.

Your plan will detail practical decisions about children's care in such areas as:

- parenting style
- living arrangements
- finances
- religion
- education
- health care
- emotional wellbeing
- connection with family.

How do we draw up a parenting plan?

Plans can be worked out personally between the parents, or with the assistance of a family dispute resolution practitioner. This can be done face to face or by telephone, online or email.

Share the care is a write-in resource to help you work out your individual plan.

Your plan will be unique to you as parents. It should be practical and suit the needs of your family, the ages and developmental stages of your children.

We have provided questions for you to think about and examples to assist you in working out your own approach. You can use these examples, change them, or write new ones to suit your situation.

Family dispute resolution can help

Family dispute resolution, or mediation, is a process in which a family dispute resolution practitioner, an independent person, helps families at any stage of separation to manage the changing nature of their family and to make decisions and work through differences with each other.

Family dispute resolution practitioners help families to stay focused on what their children need both in their day to day lives such as school and extracurricular activities, as well as long term arrangements, and how to make these arrangements as easy as possible for children to manage.

Children's participation in mediation

There may be times when children are invited to participate and meet with a qualified professional, sometimes called a child consultant or children's practitioner. In these sessions, children can talk about how they are managing and what is important to them. At no time, however, is a child put in the position of having to make the decisions.

Including children can:

- support you to develop a parenting plan that meets the best interests of your children
- give you an insight into your children's thoughts
- provide insight into their developmental needs which can be reflected in your parenting plan
- help to reduce parental conflict

This is appropriate when:

- all parties agree it would be helpful
- all parties are open to considering the views of the child
- the children haven't previously seen a professional to discuss the child's views in relation to the separation.

You can talk to your family dispute resolution practitioner if you would like to know more about this option and its suitability in your circumstances.

Changes and review

Your plan should be reviewed and updated to reflect changes in your circumstances and family's needs. Reviews can be scheduled based on changes in children's lives, such as starting school or high school, but can also happen when there are changes to work or living arrangements that will impact on your plan.

Children will also shift in their needs at different ages and stages, including how they manage their day-to-day schedule and relationship with their parents and carers.

Mediation can help support parents to hear each other's views and work together towards agreed parenting goals. Reviews can be done at any time providing you both agree, and some parents prefer not to set a formal review date. The example agreement on the next page allows you to set a date for review where both agree to do so.

Our agreement

We are the parents of:

[Name]	[Date of birth]
[Name]	[Date of birth]
[Name]	[Date of birth]
[Name]	[Date of birth]

We respect each other as parents and our significance in the lives of our children.

We have drawn up this parenting agreement to assist us in providing a loving, stable and nurturing environment for our children, consistent with their developmental levels and our social and economic circumstances.

We recognise our children’s rights to:

- emotional and physical safety, stability and security
- feel loved by both of us and significant family members/ carers
- know and be cared for by both of us and significant family members / carers.

As parents / carers, we accept responsibility for:

- our children’s physical care
- our children’s emotional stability
- our children’s changing needs as they grow and mature
- protection of our children so they are not exposed to harmful parental / family / carer conflict
- cooperation with each other to make decisions in our child’s best interests
- ensuring our children’s safety with us and any other person in their lives.

We have an existing parenting plan dated [Date]

We will review this plan on [Date]

[Parent’s signature] [Date]

[Parent’s signature] [Date]

Parenting plans and the law

A parenting plan can take any form, but to be a parenting plan under the Family Law Act it must be made free from any threat, duress or coercion. It must be in writing and signed and dated by both parents. However, a parenting plan is not legally enforceable.

If both parents agree on arrangements, you can submit your parenting plan to the court using the court's Application for Consent Orders form. The details of your parenting plan are then built into a Parenting Order, giving it the same legal effect as an order made after a court hearing.

If you cannot agree on arrangements for children, you may need to have the family law courts decide and issue a Parenting Order.

In deciding parenting arrangements, the law sets out a list of factors that describe what the family law courts must consider when determining what is best for a child.

It can be helpful for parents to consider these factors when making parenting plans and deciding things such as who will make decisions for the child and who they should live with and spend time with.

Some of the relevant factors are:

- the safety of the child and people who care for the child (including safety from being subjected to, or exposed to, family violence, abuse, neglect or other harm)
- the child's views
- the developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs of the child
- the capacity of each person who will be responsible for the child to provide for the child's developmental, psychological, emotional and cultural needs
- the benefit to the child of having a relationship with each of their parents, and other people who are significant to them (for example, grandparents and siblings)
- anything else that is relevant to the particular circumstances of the child.

If your child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, it is also important to consider how the parenting plan will help them to experience their culture.

See the Attorney-General's Department website for further information. Visit www.ag.gov.au

Changing an existing Parenting Order

Family dispute resolution can be an opportunity for parents to work together to change previous parenting orders to update and adapt without going to court. Your new parenting plan may add to, replace part, or all of the Parenting Order. However, the changes made are not enforceable unless you apply to the court for new consent orders (as described on the previous page).

Legal advice

Parents can consult a lawyer regarding their parenting plan. This way, they can explore the possible legal effects of a parenting plan made either before or after any family court orders, and enquire about the possible legal effects of the plan. The court, your state or territory law society or legal aid service can all assist. Refer to the contact list on page 40.

Your completed plan

When you have completed your parenting plan both parents should sign and date it. You should then photocopy it and each retain a copy for future reference.

For your notes

Communication



Having children creates a relationship as parents forever, regardless of how often they see either parent.

Respectful communication about how you manage the day-to-day needs of children should be as constructive and productive as possible. It is also important that parents model relationships that are respectful and positive, ensuring children don't need to manage logistics and emotions on behalf of their parents. Parents are role models for children, how they should treat others and how they should expect to be treated.

Family dispute resolution may be valuable in assisting you with this part of your plan.

Communication modes

It is often helpful for parents to decide how they will communicate and how often. Communication may be by telephone, text messaging, email or other means where safe to do so. Will you use what has worked best in the past or to try something new?

You may find it helpful to use a parenting app or an online calendar to support your communication and coordinate important dates and arrangements for children. There are many apps and online tools available with various features.

It is important to remember that children have a right to privacy. Their images and the details of their lives, schooling and activities are examples of areas where parents or carers may have different ideas about what is appropriate to share. Remembering that social media is a public space, sharing details can cause unexpected risks for your children's safety as well as creating a permanent electronic record that they may not appreciate as they grow older.

Conflict on social media can also cause stress within a family and may not be in the children's best interests or safety.

Respect

Agree on ground rules for respectful communication. For example, when is it okay to call each other and when is it not? What notice is reasonable if one of you has to change contact arrangements due to sickness or work commitments?

Values, culture, religion and principles

It is useful to discuss some of the values and principles that you agree are important in bringing up your children. You can then document these as part of your parenting plan. Changing a child's name or their religion, are examples of significant decisions relating to the values and principles that each parent might hold.

Understanding what is important for your children to share with parents can help them feel included and safe.

Children may wish to be involved in community events with one parent or cultural / religious groups even when both parents aren't involved.

Children often see their identity linked to what they have in common with parents which includes religion, culture and names.

Major long-term issues and significant decisions

Significant life decisions, such as moving house or changing schools, affect your children greatly. Moving in with a new partner is another important adjustment for children. You may agree to discuss these major decisions together before you finalise them.

This may also include expressing your wishes for the care of children in the case of parents with a terminal illness. Parents may choose to seek legal advice for such matters.

Contact with children when not in your care

Being separated means that your children are nearly always away from one of you. You need to keep communication going even when you are not physically present. At the same time, it is important that you don't make children messengers between you.

Significant people in children's lives

There are many different people who are a part of your children's lives, and contribute to their care, wellbeing and enjoyment. It can take 'a village' to raise children and, after separation, there is a chance that children may lose connections with people who play significant and important roles in their lives.

Grandparents can contribute enormously to the quality of life and emotional wellbeing of children. They may provide important support and stability in what may seem like a child's uncertain world.

Consider how grandparents will continue to play their part in the lives of your children and how you will include them in your parenting plan.

When you go through a separation it is easy to lose contact with relatives and significant family friends who provide support, encouragement and stability to your children.

Other relatives including in-laws, carers, kinship family members, siblings and step siblings, as well as close friends, may also need to be considered as part of your children's future arrangements and ensure they may continue to enjoy these relationships.



Tips

Focus on the children, not on your past relationship.

Children can cope with different rules as long as they are clear about what they are.

Children can be very worried about new partners in their parents' lives. Be sensitive to their fears and anxieties.

Do not discuss sensitive topics at changeover time—particularly if you don't communicate well. These topics are best saved for when children are away.

If you are using social media or online tools, you should research which ones are safe and best suited to your needs.



Think about

- Which decisions need our joint consultation?
- Which decisions don't need consultation?
- How are we going to conduct ourselves in front of the children when we get together? We want them to know we are cooperating with them in mind.
- How are we going to share important information, e.g. school reports, health care?
- At what times is it okay to call the other parent and when is it not?
- How will we resolve disagreements?
- What happens if one of us wants to move?
- Should we discuss how we talk to the children about the other parent?
- What communication arrangements do we need in place if an emergency were to occur?



Examples

- ☐ We agree to speak positively and respectfully about our children, and their family and friends in front and around them.
- ☐ We agree to discuss any big changes like moving house before making fixed plans.
- ☐ We agree to discuss before taking any steps to change Emma's last name.
- ☐ We will talk to each other before we make plans for activities involving our children during their other parent's time.
- ☐ We will give each other a minimum of 24 hours' notice if one of us needs to change care arrangements.
- ☐ In an emergency, the parent who is with the child, or who gets the call, will handle immediate arrangements; they will phone the other parent as soon as practical.
- ☐ Each of us will be responsible for organising contact between our children and our side of the extended family.
- ☐ We will not pass messages to each other through our children.
- ☐ We agree not to argue in front of the children or anywhere they could hear us.
- ☐ We agree to discuss holiday plans before booking travel arrangements for our children.

Our decisions about communication

Living arrangements



Living arrangements include plans for how a child spends time between their parents.

The amount of time, frequency and time of week should allow the child to have a unique and meaningful relationship with each parent while at the same time keeping practical things, such as distance to school and friends, in mind.

Children should be free to consider each parent as important in their lives even if they do different activities with them.

Time spent with children

You will need to agree on who children will live with and how much time children will spend with each parent.

Children's ages and school situations, and parents' employment and availability are considerations in your decision-making.

Exceptions may occur where there are issues of violence or abuse.

If you have concerns, you are encouraged to discuss these with the mediator. If you have immediate safety concerns for you or your children, information about family violence services is available on page 39.

Agreements for children spending time with parents need to reflect the best interests of your children and can be updated or modified as your child grows, or if situations change. Examples are provided on pages 17–19.

Supporting children's activities

Children often lead busy lives, and your parenting plan should be designed to support your children's activities.

Keeping up with their sporting and other activities can positively impact their social development and may require effective coparenting. This can involve transportation and supervision arrangements for such events as sleepovers.

If they are travelling for holidays, arrangements will need to be made to collect and return them.

Transition / moving between homes

It is important for children that the transition between their time with each of their parents goes as smoothly as possible. Children may sense conflict between you, particularly before, during and after changeover occurs.

Consider transition options that might reduce concerns you have about changeover. This might include arranging to meet each other at a neutral location outside of your homes, a public location where you feel safe or a Children's Contact Service.

The Australian Children's Contact Services Association website has an online directory to help you find a service. Visit accsa.org.au/directory

Child care and supervision of the children

When childcare or baby-sitting is required, appropriate supervision must be arranged by the parents. You can discuss childcare and also whether the other parent would be the first choice to care for children when baby-sitting is required.

Practical parenting tasks / household tasks

With children spending time in different homes, some housekeeping arrangements may need to be spelt out, such as responsibility for washing clothes, meals and sharing belongings between households.

Special days

On special days, arrangements will need to be made for children to spend time with each parent, both parents, or relatives, such as grandparents, for example on:

- child's birthday
- days of religious or cultural significance
- parents' birthdays
- Father's Day and Mother's Day
- holidays
- other important days in the family.



Tips

Supporting your children

- Think of your children having two homes, one with you and one with their other parent.
- If children can't have their own rooms give them a space they can call their own with furniture, toys and photos.
- Make changeovers as natural and friendly as possible.
- Children are affected differently by separation and may show a range of emotional or behavioural responses. Give them time and patience.
- Agree on a period of notice for changing arrangements. Plan ahead, be reliable and do what you say you'll do.
- Use a shared calendar to plan dates.



Think about

- What are our child's needs and how does this inform where they spent their time?
- What arrangements are going to best suit the needs of our child?
- At what age will our child be ready and comfortable to travel unaccompanied?
- How can our child stay connected to both parents even when there are long periods of physical separation?
- What alternative care arrangements are best for our child if neither of us can look after them?
- How do we ensure school holidays are not a stress?
- How will I know the best time to call our child?
- How can our child maintain contact when a parent works long hours?
- How do our child's clothes travel between households?
- How do we help our child swap belongings between households?
- How can drop-offs and pick-ups work best for our child?
- How can we ensure our child doesn't miss their important extracurricular engagements on weekends or after school?
- If our child attends a sleepover away from our homes, how can we make sure that they are safe?
- What amount of screen time do we agree on for our child?
- How do we ensure that our child's internet use is safe and age-appropriate?



Examples

- ☐ Our children will spend time with each parent.
- ☐ Our children will live with Quynh. They will go to Alex's place every second week. Alex will pick them up at 6pm following after school care on Fridays from the school and will return them to school on Monday mornings.
- ☐ Aaliyah is in year 12. To minimise disruption to her studies she will live with one parent for the school week and will see her other parent on Saturday or on another day arranged between them.
- ☐ Our children will spend Christmas lunch every year with Dad and go to Mum's at 5pm for the evening meal.
- ☐ When the children are with one parent, the other parent will ring between 6pm and 8pm each night.
- ☐ We will encourage our children to ring the other parent once every day when they are apart.
- ☐ Malik's paternal grandparents will take him to soccer every Saturday and return him after lunch.
- ☐ If either one of us intends to rely on a third person to pick up the children, we will first notify the other parent by phone or text.
- ☐ For our changeovers, we will meet at 4pm at the school.
- ☐ Our children will live with Bethany, and spend most of the Christmas holidays and 2 weeks in one of the other holidays with Grace.

Our decisions about our living arrangements

Finances



Negotiating clear and detailed financial arrangements for your children's expenses can save conflict and stress further down the track.

Discuss the tips and checklist provided on the next 2 pages and write down your decisions and agreements.

Negotiating finance can become complex so use family dispute resolution if you can't agree. Relationships Australia can help.

Child support

The care arrangements for a child can affect a parent's child support payments, Family Tax Benefit and Child Care Subsidy and income support payments. Keep this in mind when agreeing on a parenting plan.

More information can be found on the Services Australia website: servicesaustralia.gov.au/learning-about-child-support



Tips

Agree on the easy things first.

Think of yourselves as business partners working together for the sake of the children.

Focus on the children's needs and try not to become involved in discussions about each other's lifestyle.



Think about

- How will we share day to day costs?
- How will pocket money be handled?
- How will the Child Support Assessment be taken into account?
- How will we handle unforeseen costs?
- What will we do if our financial positions change?
- How will financial arrangements change as the children grow up?

Checklist of common expenses

Clothes

- ☐ Uniform
- ☐ Casual
- ☐ Sports
- ☐ Formal
- ☐ Shoes
- ☐ Dry cleaning

Medical

- ☐ Doctors
- ☐ Prescriptions
- ☐ Glasses
- ☐ Dentists, braces
- ☐ Insurance

Education

- ☐ School fees
- ☐ Lunches
- ☐ Excursions
- ☐ Books and stationery
- ☐ After-school care
- ☐ Vacation care
- ☐ Extra-curricular activities

Entertainment

- ☐ Cinemas
- ☐ Video and music subscriptions
- ☐ Parties
- ☐ Other activities

Other

- ☐ Mobile phone calls
- ☐ Holidays
- ☐ Presents, birthday and other
- ☐ Transport (bus, taxis)
- ☐ Pocket money
- ☐ Treats
- ☐ Birthdays
- ☐ Toiletries



Tips

Pocket money tips

What do other children of the same age get? What will your child be expected to spend this on? Who will provide the pocket money and when?

Does your child have a bank account and do you expect them to save?



Examples

- ☐ We will share equally the costs of our children's agreed extracurricular activities.
- ☐ Mum will pay pocket money; Dad will pay for Lynn's mobile phone plan with amounts negotiated with children direct.
- ☐ The parents will negotiate unforeseen expenses as they come up.
- ☐ Nathan will pay health insurance; Kai will pay school expenses including fees and books.
- ☐ Costs for school excursions and camps will be split 50/50.
- ☐ We will review our financial arrangements at the end of every calendar year.

Our financial decisions

Education



Changing schools can be very disruptive for children. To achieve continuity and stability, consider leaving schooling arrangements unchanged until the end of the school year.

If you change schools, this may raise questions such as:

- which school?
- private or public?
- school fees?
- transport?
- after-hours school care?



Tips

School activities and events

Offer to help with school events like fundraising, working bees and committees or helping at sports day. Children generally love having their parents involved at school.

It is helpful if parents communicate with each other about involvement in school events. If this is challenging to organise by yourselves, you may find discussing this in mediation helpful.

Make sure the school has both your contact details and any relevant documents.

Take responsibility yourself for finding out about school activities and events.



Think about

- Getting the school to send notices, reports and other material related to my child's progress to both parents.
- Consider how your children might be feeling about their parents' involvement at school.
- It might be helpful to make contact with the school or school counsellors so that they will be aware of your separation and how this may affect your children.
- Depending on your children's age, you might want to ask them how they would like you to interact with their school.



Examples

- ☐ We agree to make joint decisions on where our children will go for their primary and secondary schooling.
- ☐ We will discuss changing Ben's school after October once everyone's living arrangements are clearer.
- ☐ Each parent will spend 2 hours a week helping in Miya's kindergarten.
- ☐ Each parent will arrange for the school to send us both copies of our children's reports.

Our decisions for our children's education



Other decisions

Any other topics that you may wish to include.

Emergency contacts



Compile a list of emergency contact numbers for your children.

Parents / carers

Name:

Name:

Home:

Home:

Work:

Work:

Mobile:

Mobile:

Relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc)

Name:

Name:

Home:

Home:

Work:

Work:

Mobile:

Mobile:

School (teachers, counsellors, before- or after-school care)

Healthcare (doctor, dentist, optician, specialists, hospital, pharmacy)

Extracurricular activities (coaches, teachers, etc)

Friends

Other

Emergency services numbers

Police / Fire / Ambulance

Ph: 000 (Australia-wide)

Poisons Information Centre

Ph:

State /
territory:

Health and wellbeing record



For:

[Child's name]

Updated on:

[Date]

Medicare

Card number:

Individual reference number:

Private health

Health fund name:

Member number:

Immunisations (Recent and upcoming vaccines including type and date)

Medications

Health response plans (e.g. anaphylaxis / asthma plan)

Specialists / medical and wellbeing team (e.g. counsellor)

Allergies

Significant past illnesses

Previous operations and response to general anaesthetic

Antibiotics okay? Yes ☐ No ☐

Additional notes

Health and wellbeing record



For:

[Child's name]

Updated on:

[Date]

Medicare

Card number:

Individual reference number:

Private health

Health fund name:

Member number:

Immunisations (Recent and upcoming vaccines including type and date)

Medications

Health response plans (e.g. anaphylaxis / asthma plan)

Specialists / medical and wellbeing team (e.g. counsellor)

Allergies

Significant past illnesses

Previous operations and response to general anaesthetic

Antibiotics okay? Yes ☐ No ☐

Additional notes

Health and wellbeing record



For:

[Child's name]

Updated on:

[Date]

Medicare

Card number:

Individual reference number:

Private health

Health fund name:

Member number:

Immunisations (Recent and upcoming vaccines including type and date)

Medications

Health response plans (e.g. anaphylaxis / asthma plan)

Specialists / medical and wellbeing team (e.g. counsellor)

Allergies

Significant past illnesses

Previous operations and response to general anaesthetic

Antibiotics okay? Yes ☐ No ☐

Additional notes

Useful resources



National

These national organisations offer or can refer you to your local services.

1800RESPECT: Free and confidential information, counselling and support service available for people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call 1800 737 732.

Relationships Australia: Family dispute resolution services, counselling, education, and children's contact services. Visit relationships.org.au or call 1300 364 277.

Family Relationships Online

Information for all families – whether together or separated – about family relationship issues. Find out about a range of services to assist families manage relationship issues, including helping families agree on arrangements for children after parents separate.

Visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Family Relationship Advice Line

a national telephone service that helps families affected by relationship or separation issues, including information on parenting arrangements after separation. It can also refer callers to local services that provide assistance. Call 1800 050 321.

Parenting and families

Australian Childhood Foundation

childhood.org.au

Australian Children's Contact Services Association

<https://accsa.org.au>

Department of Social Services (Australian Government)

dss.gov.au/our-work/families-and-children

Family Services Australia
(New South Wales)

1800 372 000
familyservices.org.au

Parenting SA

parenting.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network

raisingchildren.net.au

Services Australia

Child Support Info Service: 131 107
servicesaustralia.gov.au

Access

Interpreter services

13 14 50
tisnational.gov.au

National Relay Service

accesshub.gov.au

Family violence

1800RESPECT

1800 737 732
1800respect.org.au

Financial

National Debt Helpline

1800 007 007
ndh.org.au

Moneysmart

moneysmart.gov.au

First Nations

13YARN

13 92 76
13yarn.org.au

Legal

**Attorney-General's
Department**

[ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/
families/children-and-family-law](http://ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/families/children-and-family-law)

**Federal Circuit and
Family Court of Australia**

1300 352 000
fcfcoa.gov.au

**Family Court of
Western Australia**

familycourt.wa.gov.au

Family Law Section

familylawsection.org.au

LGBTQIA+ communities

QLife

1800 184 527
qlife.org.au

Mental health

Beyond Blue

1300 224 636
beyondblue.org.au

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800
kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline Australia

13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au

MensLine Australia

1300 789 978
mensline.org.au

Suicide Callback Service

1300 659 467
suicidecallbackservice.org.au



1300 364 277

www.relationships.org.au

Relationships Australia is a leading, not-for-profit provider that supports individuals, couples, families and communities to have safe and respectful relationships.

We provide counselling, family dispute resolution, trauma support, mental health services, and a diverse range of other family and community support, professional training and education programs. These are delivered through a network of over 100 service locations across all Australian states and territories. Our work is informed by our 75 years of experience and our knowledge of the crucial role of relationships in protecting and enhancing mental health and wellbeing.

As a community-based organisation with no religious affiliations, our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious beliefs, age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background or economic circumstances.