

## COOPERATIVE PARENTING PLANS

— *By the Honorable Arline Rotman, Worcester Probate  
and Family Court Chair of the Parental Access  
Committee*

*[This article originally appeared in the November 1993 issue of the Massachusetts Bar Association's Family Law  
Section newsletter.]*

The following members served on the committee that developed the Cooperative Parenting Plan:

- John Anastasi, Esq., Worcester County
- Valerie J. Botter, Esq., Hampshire County
- Bruce D. Clarkin, Esq., Hampden County
- Lee Flourney, Esq., Berkshire County
- Penelope A. Kathiwala, Esq., Worcester County
- William Levine, Esq., Suffolk County
- Robert Lian, Esq., Worcester County
- Laurence J. Madfis, Esq., Norfolk County
- Rita Pollak, Esq., Suffolk County
- Laurie Raphaelson, Esq., Worcester County
- Hon. Arline Rotman, Chair
- Hon. Susan Ricci, Circuit Judge
- Barbara Zalucki, Esq., Hampden County

The Cooperative Parenting Plan, formerly known as Visitation Guidelines, is now complete. The committee responsible for the plan's production has been diligently meeting, listening, debating, drafting and re-drafting since September 1992. I would formally like to thank all the members of the committee for their dedication. The committee listed above represents a balance of geography, gender and age. I would also like to thank Dr. Geri Fuhrmann, Dr. Linda Cavallero, Dr. Beth Ashenberg, Dr. Robert Zibell and Dr. Kenneth Herman for their invaluable input.

We believe that the guidelines take into account the concerns of the mental health community without compromising the realities faced by the legal profession. All of us who work with restructuring families need to educate ourselves so that we may counsel parents more effectively. It is the hope of our committee that this Cooperative Parenting Plan will be an important contribution in helping parents focus on the needs of their children. You are encouraged to distribute the Cooperative Parenting Plan to your clients confronting issues of parenting, custody and visitation.

## ASSESSMENT OF CONFLICT

<b>Minimal</b>	<b>Mild</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Moderately Severe</b>	<b>Severe</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cooperative parenting</li> <li>▪ Ability to separate children's needs from own needs</li> <li>▪ Can validate importance of other parent</li> <li>▪ Can affirm the competency of other parent</li> <li>▪ Conflict is resolved between the adults using verbal exchange with only occasional expressions of anger</li> <li>▪ Negative emotions quickly brought under control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Occasionally berates other parent in front of child</li> <li>▪ Occasional verbal quarreling in front of child</li> <li>▪ Questioning child about personal matters in life of other parent</li> <li>▪ Occasional attempts to form a coalition with child against other parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Verbal abuse with no threat or history of physical violence</li> <li>▪ Loud quarreling</li> <li>▪ Denigration of other parent</li> <li>▪ Threatens to limit access of other parent</li> <li>▪ Threats of litigation</li> <li>▪ On-going attempts to form coalition with child against other parent around isolated issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child is not directly endangered but parents are endangering to each other</li> <li>▪ Threatening violence</li> <li>▪ Slamming doors, throwing things</li> <li>▪ Verbally threatening harm or kidnapping</li> <li>▪ Continual litigation</li> <li>▪ Attempts to form a permanent or standing coalition with child against other parent (alienation syndrome)</li> <li>▪ Child is experiencing emotional endangerment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Endangerment by physical or sexual abuse</li> <li>▪ Drug or alcohol abuse to point of impairment</li> <li>▪ Severe psychological pathology</li> </ul>

## **Introduction**

These guidelines are for families in which parents do not live together with the children. They are to be used to educate families in the process of separation and divorce, families that have been restructured as a result of divorce, and for parents who never married.

The guidelines will assist parents, lawyers, family service officers, mediators, mental health professionals and judges in establishing a parenting plan which best meets the needs of individual children. The guidelines set forth standards which should be adjusted to meet the needs and circumstances of each family.

The guidelines are based upon the developmental stages of children. They reflect accepted psychological principles relating to children's developmental needs. The co-parenting plan guidelines provide a common frame of reference in order to minimize parental conflict and to maximize the "best interests" of the children.

The guidelines make certain assumptions. They are:

- Most parents want to minimize the potential negative impact of court actions on their children;
- At the time of separation and divorce, most parents would benefit from assistance in focusing on and understanding the needs of their children; and
- Most parents, if given reliable information about the developmental needs of children, will integrate that information into their own co-parenting plan.

The guidelines are a starting point for devising a parenting schedule for families. Within each sibling group, the family should consider the temperament of each child, the developmental and social needs of each child, the parenting patterns in existence at the time of separation, the amount of time spent in daycare or other specialized activities, and any other identifiable stressors in existence at the time. Divorce is highly stressful for all children. Parents with more than one child may decide it is best to develop more than one plan for their family. One-on-one time with individual children can be valuable.

A cooperative parenting plan is an evolutionary scheme, changing as the cooperative needs of the children and parent/child relationships change. Parties are encouraged to include a method for accommodating changes in the parenting plan, taking into account the changes in their children's adjustment to divorce, developmental needs and individual activities.

In cases of high-conflict families or where other special factors exist such as chemical dependency, serious physical or mental illness, or allegations of sexual or physical abuse, the application of these guidelines may be inappropriate. Included in the guidelines is a chart entitled, "Assessment of Conflict," that can be used to assess parents' level of conflict in order to determine whether or not these guidelines should be used.

If the cooperative parenting plan is to work well, the parents must be willing to encourage their children to master required developmental tasks.

The developmental stages of children represent a continuum. Children progress along the continuum at varying speeds depending upon a variety of factors such as their individual temperament, their place in the family, and external events in their lives. Categorization by age is based upon developmental norms, but each child must be seen as an individual. Separation and divorce are major stressors in a child's life and may cause a child temporarily to regress. This regression should be accounted for in developing and adjusting your cooperative parenting plan.

## **Cooperative Parenting Plans**

### ***A. Age 0 to 18 Months***

#### **Developmental Goals**

##### *Primary Tasks*

- Building attachment to the primary caretaker; and
- Developing a sense of trust in the world.

##### *Secondary Tasks*

- Developing loving attachment to the other parent; and
- Exploring their environment from a secure base.

#### **Cooperative Parenting Plan**

One primary home base with primary caretaker. Short and frequent time with other parent: two to three times weekly beginning with two to four hours each. Work toward extending time toward an eight-hour day. This long day may need to be delayed if child is in daycare. Although not generally recommended, at 12 months, one overnight each week may be considered with an easy and adaptable child, with cooperative parents or older siblings.

#### **Understanding the Plan**

The primary task of an infant is to build a secure attachment to a primary caretaker. An infant needs consistent surroundings and a consistent routine to accomplish this task. If a good attachment is made, the child will be able to move on, develop a sense of independence and form good relationships in the future. If this attachment is not made or is disrupted, the child will be at risk for depression and may not be able to form good relationships in the future. Overnights are generally not recommended because the child needs the security of the same surroundings each night. The child's need for security should not be seen as a judgment on the parenting abilities of either party.

*Caution:* If secure attachment does not take place at this time in a child's life, the damage may be

irreversible. The child cannot make up this stage later in life.

### ***B. Age 18 to 36 Months***

#### **Developmental Goals**

- Beginning of independent functioning;
- Developing self-confidence;
- Age at which healthy children are “full of themselves”; and
- Ability to separate from parent toward end of stage.

#### **Cooperative Parenting Plan**

Two to three times weekly with one overnight if child shows no developmental difficulties. When one overnight is successful, a second may be added. It is preferable to begin with overnights spaced throughout the week, particularly if dealing with an only child.

#### **Understanding the Plan**

Children do not have an adult’s concept of time. Overnights can begin and be expanded when a child can hold the image of the primary caretaker in his or her mind and use the image for self-comfort. The other parent should continue frequent contact with the child so that the child can remember him or her during separations.

Suggestions for maintaining image of absent parent during separation:

- Encourage the child to keep a picture of absent parent during separation;
- Prepare an audio- or videotape of absent parent reading a bedtime story; and
- Encourage telephone contact between visits.

### ***C. Age 3 to 5 Years***

#### **Developmental Goals**

- Continued development of individuality including ability to express feelings and needs;
- Learning to manage emotions and impulses;
- Learning socialization skills; and
- Positive same sex identification with parent.

#### **Cooperative Parenting Plan**

The child continues to need a home base. One or two nonconsecutive overnights per week with

the other parent. Alternate short weekends (one overnight) and some midweek time toward the end of this period, a long weekend (two overnights) with midweek time may be appropriate.

### **Understanding the Plan**

The amount of time the child spends with each parent should reflect the proportion of each parent's prior involvement with the child. The preschool child needs clear parental roles and values with frequent and *predictable* contact with the other parent. Parental conflict has a negative impact on children and they need frequent reassurance of his/her parents' love. Frequent and continuing contact with same sex parent is vital.

### ***D. Age 6 to 9 Years***

#### **Developmental Goals**

- Develop peer and community relationships;
- Attain personal competence and self esteem; and
- Develop empathy and a sense of right and wrong.

#### **Cooperative Parenting Plan**

One to three overnights a week with other parent. Many children still require a home base. Alternate short or long weekends with an evening during the week. The child's social activity commitments should be given priority whenever possible. A weekday overnight should be considered to allow the other parent to participate in the child's schooling. Factors to be taken into account include residential proximity, parents' work schedules and the child's adjustment.

### **Understanding the Plan**

These children need frequent contact with both parents. They are susceptible to fear of losing both parents and often feel a sadness relating to the loss. They suffer as a result of the parents' separation. Parents need to support the child's participation in activities and the development of relationships outside the family. Children at the older end of this group may want to have input into the parenting plan.

### ***E. 10 to 13 Years***

#### **Developmental Goals**

- Increased autonomy – developing and strengthening relationships to the community of school and friends;
- Exploration of child's unique skills, testing the limits of his or her own achievements; and
- Development of social and moral behavior, consideration for others' feelings, well internalized controls.

## **Cooperative Parenting Plan**

School age children can do well with many different co-parenting plans as long as they provide for relatively frequent contact with both parents. Plans may include overnights each week or every other weekend. They can include long weekends, split weeks or mid-week overnights with return to school or bus stop the next morning. Children this age can also adapt to longer blocks of time away from the home base as long as telephone calls and some contact with the other parent can be arranged and supported. It is important to accommodate the child's social activities and commitments.

## **Understanding the Plan**

It is of vital importance that a child in this age range be permitted to participate fully in activities in his or her community of school, friends, sports and religious groups. This may require considerable flexibility on the part of the parents, especially since children's interests change and some important events for children (birthday parties, sleepovers) occur sporadically.

### *F. Age 14 to 18 Years*

#### **Developmental Goals**

- Gradual and healthy separation from both parents;
- Developing his or her own individual identity;
- Establishing sense of self with regard to rules and regulations of society, school and peer groups; and
- Understanding sexual and other feelings in the context of relationship.

## **Cooperative Parenting Plan**

Children of this age continue to do well with many co-parenting plans.

## **Understanding the Plan**

This is a time when children are particularly vulnerable to changes within the family and to pressure from outside the family. Stability and calm are important in both households as an adolescent's feelings are often changeable and intense. Increased school work, extracurricular activities, employment, peer relationship, sports, are often more important than time with family or either parent.

While the adolescent appears to be struggling to become independent, there is still a need for consistency, support and meaningful time with both parents. Parents should be aware of a teenager's need to be consulted, informed and listened to when making plans without giving up the adult/child relationship and the structure that can only be provided by both adults. Parents can remain flexible while maintaining age-appropriate controls.

## ***G. Holidays***

### **Major Holidays**

The major holidays should be alternated or shared by both parents with special emphasis on prior family traditions as well as religious holidays. The location of both parents and their respective families shall be considered in determining how holidays should be shared. These major family traditions and holidays include: Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; Easter Holiday; religious holidays (when applicable); New Year's Day; Jewish New Year/Chinese New Year (when applicable); Thanksgiving Day; family birthdays; Mother's/Father's Day; and Halloween.

### **Civil Holidays**

The following civil holidays may also be considered: Fourth of July; Memorial Day; Labor Day; Columbus Day; Veteran's Day; Martin Luther King Day; St. Patrick's Day; Patriot's Day; and school holidays.

### **Monday Holidays**

The parties should consider providing for the civil holidays which are celebrated on Mondays by allowing the child to remain with whichever parent has the child for that weekend.

## ***H. Vacations***

Children benefit from extended uninterrupted vacation time with each parent consistent with their abilities to handle separation from the other parent. The length of time for each vacation period is dependent upon the age of the children, the geographic location and the employment of the parties.

Extended vacation time is not generally recommended for children less than 18 months. Parents might consider a series of daytime visits for children this age.

Once overnights away from the home base have been successfully established for a period of six months, a one-week vacation two to three times a year may be considered.

Starting at age five, and depending upon the adaptability and maturity of the child, two consecutive weeks with each of the parents may be considered. If geography permits, the child should be allowed a short time with the non-vacationing parent when vacations of two consecutive weeks are first implemented. Children should be allowed some form of contact with the other parent during all extended vacation periods. The number of vacations during the year depends upon the ability of each of the parents to spend vacation time with the child.

Once children are comfortable with two-week separations from parents, additional time may be considered. At that time, several other factors are important to making vacation decisions. The guiding purpose is to provide the least disruption for the child with the maximum amount of time with each parent.



Generally, vacations should not interfere with school time. If parents wish to split all school vacations, including the summer vacation, they should consider whether or not this would require unnecessary transitions for the child. If both parents are employed and a child is in a summer daycare or day camp program, an equal sharing arrangement should be considered only if the parents live close enough to each other to allow continuity of daycare. If this is not possible, vacation time should coincide with the parents' vacation. If one parent is not employed outside the home, vacation time with the working parent is generally beneficial only if that parent is on vacation too.

As children reach adolescence, the wishes and activities of the children must be taken into account in structuring vacation time. The purpose of vacation time is to provide the parents and the children the opportunity for extended time together.

### *I. Tips for Good Parenting*

Good parents:

- Communicate with each other about their children;
- Do all in their power to minimize conflict between themselves;
- Place their children's interests ahead of their own;
- Make child-related decisions out of the presence of the children;
- Never use their children to deliver support checks and messages to the other parent;
- Are able to be flexible in their co-parenting plans to accommodate their child's extracurricular activities;
- Do not speak critically of the other parent in the presence of the children;
- Spend time alone with their children if they remarry;
- Are with their children during scheduled times and communicate with the children if they cannot;
- Respect the other parent's times to be with the children and do not schedule conflicting plans;
- Encourage the children to communicate directly with the other parent;
- Assure their children that they did not cause the divorce and that they do not have the power to reverse the process; and
- Do not seek information from the children about the other parent.

Good parents reassure their children that they will be cared for and protected.