

# Children's everyday life after divorce or separation

Parental  
cooperation plan



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Everyday life of children after a divorce or separation – parental cooperation plan

Part 2: Instructions for preparing a plan

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# How to proceed in preparing a plan

Before preparing a parenting plan, you should first read through Part 1: Information for parents. It will provide you with information on what a parenting plan is and how it will help you make arrangements concerning the everyday life of your child. Part 1 also contains important information on the best ways to help your children cope with the divorce or separation and how you can build your co-parenting despite the difficulties arising from the situation.

Part 2, which you are now reading, contains instructions for preparing a parenting plan. This part starts from the child's needs and then takes you through the five subject areas included in a parenting plan. Each subject area includes examples of how some parents have planned things. The examples are neither good nor bad – they simply demonstrate that there are many possible solutions. Part 2 also includes practical instructions for negotiations between parents and helps you control the strong emotions that often arise during discussions.

Part 3 of the parenting plan is a plan template that you can use to write down your own plan. The plan template includes questions that you can consider when preparing your plan. They are things that many parents are forced to consider. Focus on the questions that are important to you. The bottom of the template includes space for you to write down your own plan.

- **A good plan is practical and helpful in everyday life.**
- **Make sure that you have a mutual understanding of the things you write down.**
- **The more details you include in your plan, the more helpful the plan will be, but you may have to update it more often.**
- **In time, you will also face situations in which you will need to be flexible.**
- **Once the plan is finished, take copies of it for both of you.**
- **You will need to update the plan when circumstances change and as the children grow. Some parents want to write down the date when they intend to check that the plan is still up to date.**
- **A good plan looks and feels like you.**
- **However, if negotiations are unsuccessful or it is difficult to follow the plan you have prepared, you can turn to your municipality's child welfare officer or family mediator for help. You can also seek mediation through the district court, which offers court mediation in custody disputes.**

# Start from the child's needs

What kind of child is your child? What is important to the child and what are they interested in? What does the child not like and what kinds of things are difficult for them? What do you think the child would hope for from you in a divorce or separation process? The plan template presents questions that will help you consider your child's needs.

Also, think a little bit further ahead: what would your child hope for the situation to be like in two or three years, for example? What arrangements would satisfy the child?

**Also discuss the situation with the child and ask what the child is thinking about, hoping for or worried about.** However, do not grill the child or ask for their opinion about the matter – just see what kind of things are on the child's mind. **It is not the child's duty to solve things, and the child should never have to choose a side between the parents.**

The parenting plan template presents questions related to the child's needs and includes a space in which you can write down your thoughts and observations about the child's needs.

Afterwards, consider how the observations you have written down affect the practical arrangements. How do the child's needs affect things such as decisions on living arrangements, parenting time, communication or the cooperation between you parents?

Use your description of your child's needs and what is important to them as a guideline and assess possible solutions from their perspective. **Before thinking about which parent the child should live with, you should first consider the child's needs with regard to their living arrangements.** Doing so first can make it easier for you to assess what kind of living arrangements best meet the child's present needs.

After this consideration of the child's needs, the plan moves on to practical arrangements for the child in five different areas. The following pages will address things related to the child's everyday life, one area at a time. Discussing and agreeing on these things will build a foundation for your parenting after the divorce or separation.



# Information sharing and communication

Shared children will forever connect you to each other as parents. After a divorce or separation, the biggest challenge is making your relationship and cooperation as parents as constructive as possible. This may understandably be difficult for the parents themselves, but it is important that the children see you communicate amicably.

Mutually agreed ground rules on your communication methods and cooperation form the key foundation for your parenting plan.

## Communication between the parents

Is it better to talk about the things related to your children face to face during scheduled meetings, by phone, by text message, by e-mail or in some other way? Use a method that has worked well for you before or try a new method.

Agree on common ground rules as a basis for constructive and respectful information sharing. For example, when is it a good time to call the other and when should you not call? In what way and how much in advance should you notify the other parent if you unexpectedly have to change meeting arrangements? What will you do if the child gets sick?

Plan how you want to implement the moving of the child between the parents' homes in order to make it as easy as possible for the child. During pick-up and drop-off situations, discuss things constructively and amicably. **Save any difficult and controversial discussions for times when your children are not around to hear them.** Consider where you talk about difficult things. Respect each other's privacy and right to your own separate lives. For example, a pick-up or drop-off situation at the front door is not a chance to pry into the other parent's life.

## Major questions of principle

Discuss the things that are fundamentally important to you in your child's upbringing – what kind of values and principles you want to follow as parents. You may also have differing principles that you wish to follow. The child will not break even if different homes have different rules – the most important thing is to be consistent and open about them. You can write these rules down in your parenting plan.

Also try to anticipate major questions that you may face in the future, such as moving into a new apartment, switching schools or day care centres or a parent finding a new partner or spouse. All these things have a significant impact on your child's everyday life, which is why you may want to plan in advance how you will proceed with them and how you will discuss them amongst yourselves or with the child. You may also want to make back-up plans in case one parent falls seriously ill or dies.

## Maintaining relations between the parents, children and other friends and family

A divorce or separation means that your children will almost always be away from one parent. However, it is important to maintain contact between the child and the parent, even if you are apart physically. Today, there are numerous channels and opportunities for communication, which will help you communicate to your child that you care about them and are present in their life. Agree on a method and frequency of communication that best suits your everyday routines.

Allow the child to stay at the other home in peace. Even if you feel lonely, do not take your own loneliness out on the child. Make room for the other parent's parenting.

The most important thing for the child's well-being is that the child maintains a close relationship and connection with both parents. Obstructing this connection is detrimental to the child. Do all you can to maintain the child's connection to the other parent. Stick to scheduled meetings.

Grandparents may be an important source of support and a safety net in the tumult of the parents' divorce or separation. Close relations with grandparents may contribute greatly to the child's well-being. Consider how you can maintain the relationship between the grandparents and your children and how you can support their communication.

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During a divorce or separation process, contact with relatives and friends is easily lost. However, they could provide your child with a great deal of support, encouragement and a sense of permanence. Consider how you can help maintain your children's important friendships and relationships with relatives.



## Examples of entries written by parents:

'We will not make major decisions (e.g. moving to another town) without discussing it with each other first.'

'We will handle our disagreements and arguments in such a way that the children cannot hear us.'

'If our own discussions come to an impasse, we commit to resolving our issues first through family mediation or court mediation before taking the matter to trial.'

'Our child will continue to have three equal parents. We will try to ensure that the school, after-school club, health care services and other services communicate any information concerning the child to all parents as much as possible.'

'We will notify each other no later than a day in advance if there are any changes to schedules we have agreed on.'

'We will use the notebook carried by the child to exchange information between us.'

'When we drop off or pick up the child, we will only exchange greetings to avoid getting into an argument. We will exchange any news about the child by e-mail.'

'When we drop off or pick up the children, we will all sit down together for a moment and tell the other parent what we have been up to over the past week.'

'If our new spouse will be coming to pick up the child, we will notify the other parent of it by phone, and the other parent will then inform the child in advance.'

'In cases of emergencies, the parent currently caring for the child or the parent who is notified of the emergency will immediately take any necessary actions and then call the other parent.'

'We will each take care of meetings and communication between our children and their relatives on our respective sides of the family.'

'We will not ask the child to act as a messenger between us.'

'When our children are at one parent's house, the other parent will call them daily between 7 and 8 pm.'

'We will help our child call the other parent once a day via Skype.'

# Living arrangements and time spent at the parents' houses

## Parenting times

When planning parenting times, you should consider the lengths of the periods spent by the child living with each parent. In Finland, a child may only have one registered address, but they may spend equal amounts of time living with each parent. Even when the parents agree on an alternate week arrangement, they must write down in their agreement which home they will report as the child's official place of residence.

The types of solutions that best meet the child's individual needs depend on the child's age, need for day care, school attendance and hobbies as well as the parents' living arrangements, the distance between their homes and the parents' work situations and availability. Would shared parenting be the ideal solution for your child or would it be a burden to them for one reason or another? The advantage of shared parenting is that the child naturally retains their connection with both parents. The drawback is that the arrangement may prove to be burdensome, particularly for the child. The child's needs may also change over time, potentially leading to a need to change parenting times.

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If you think that sharing parenting time equally is not expedient, try to come up with an arrangement that allows the child to spend important and meaningful time with both of you. This generally means allowing the child to spend both weekdays and weekends, days and nights, and holidays and public holidays with each parent. This arrangement allows you both to be part of the child's everyday life and also share in the special occasions in their life. Sharing parenting time equally is not necessarily the most important thing: what is important is that you both provide the child with all the resources, nurturing and good things that you are able to provide.

## Transport, the children's hobbies and other excursions

Make mutual arrangements for how you will support your children's hobbies and other activities. The continuation of the children's hobbies and friendships is important to their well-being. This requires you, as parents, to arrange things such as transport and sleepovers or birthday parties and agree on how you will divide these tasks.

## Drop-off and pick-up situations

Drop-off and pick-up situations may evoke conflicting emotions in the child, as they are forced to separate from one parent while having already missed the other. You should prepare for this. It is therefore important that the drop-off and pick-up situations proceed as smoothly and calmly as possible. Your children can sense it if there is tension between you two, and they may start feeling more nervous about these situations. Try to find arrangements that make the switch between homes as smooth and natural as possible for the child. If it feels that dropping off or picking up the child at the front door causes difficulties, consider a more neutral place outside home.

## **Babysitting**

Plan how you wish to arrange babysitting when needed. Do you want the child's other parent to always be the first person who is asked to babysit? Which parent is responsible for arranging a babysitter if previously agreed arrangements fall through? What other things do you want to agree on or require from your child's babysitter?

## **Taking care of the child's clothing and equipment**

When the child spends time at different homes, you should agree on practical arrangements in advance: who will purchase and wash the clothing? Will the child bring their possessions and toys with them when switching houses or will the child have separate toys at each home? How will you share the responsibility for purchases that the child needs?

## **Public holidays and other special occasions**

Which public holidays or other days are of particular importance to your family (Christmas, New Year, Easter, Midsummer, Mother's Day, Father's Day, the child's birthday, birthdays of the parents or other friends or family, holidays, other days important to the family)? For example, what marks the start of Christmas or Easter for your family and when do they end? What arrangements would allow the child to spend special occasions with the people important to them? For example, do you hold separate birthday parties for the child at each parent's home or do you all gather together for the same party?



**Examples of entries written by parents:**

'Our children will spend an equal amount of time at each parent's house.'

'Our children will live with their father. They will spend every other week at their mother's house.'

'The mother will pick up the children on Thursdays after school and drop them off at the school on Tuesday mornings.'

'Our children will live with their mother and spend all but one week of their summer holidays with their father.'

'Our children will live in our shared home. The parents will take turns living with them. The mother will stay with the children from the 1st until the 15th day of each month, while the father will stay with them from the 16th day of each month until the end of the month.'

'Our child will continue to live with his mother and meet his father on the weekends. Additionally, he will see his bonus mother on a weekly basis. She will pick him up from school, take him to his recreational activity and to eat afterwards, before dropping him off at his mother's in the evening. During school holidays, he may spend time with his bonus mother in ways that will be agreed on separately.'

'Our child will turn 14 this year. In order for her to be able to focus on studying in the upper stage of comprehensive school, she will live with one of her parents for most of the week. She will meet the other parent every Saturday or, alternatively, some other day as agreed.'

'Our child will live with each father on alternate weeks. He will also meet his mother on one weekday every week and spend one weekend with her every month as agreed separately.'

'We commit to living at a distance of no more than two kilometres away from each other for as long as it is necessary for the children's school attendance. The children will live with their mothers on alternate weeks. Each mother will transport the children to and from their recreational activities during their parenting time.'

'Our children will spend every Christmas Eve with their father and go to their mother's for Christmas dinner at 6 pm.'

# Sharing financial responsibility

Planning financial arrangements in advance can spare you from many arguments along the way. The most fruitful thing would be to consider the child's needs and then agree on how these needs will be met.

You should keep in mind that the parents will retain the same maintenance responsibility for the child after their divorce or separation. Just like before, they will have to consider how they, as parents, will take care of the child's expenses and what purchases and expenses they can afford. Particularly if the child spends an equal amount of time with each parent, the parents must discuss many purchases and expenses that fall outside other everyday arrangements.

A child maintenance agreement is not required. The parents can agree on the maintenance arrangements they want through negotiation instead. The questions presented in part 3 of the parenting plan may help you understand the financial questions related to the child as a whole. Consider what kind of arrangements would, for example, safeguard the child's participation in a recreational activity that they are interested in if you, as parents, think that it is important to make this wish come true. You should also consider how you will handle situations in which one parent would like something to be purchased for the child, but the other parent cannot afford it.

The child's needs will change as they grow, which is why sharing financial responsibility should be discussed from time to time. The parents' financial situations may also change, leading to a need to update the plan.

When discussing money, the most useful thing is to focus on the child's needs and avoid conversations about the parents' spending habits or lifestyles. The easiest thing is to try and treat the other parent as a cooperation partner with whom you will consider the best solutions to the children's needs.



### Examples of entries written by parents in a parenting plan:

'The father will pay the children's insurance premiums and the costs of the daughter's horse riding hobby (max. X euros per month). The mother will pay both children's phone bills and for clothing expenses as well as for the son's glasses and the costs of his football hobby (max. X euros per month). This cost sharing arrangement will be reconsidered if either of the children change hobbies.'

'The mother will purchase and pay for the equipment related to the children's hobbies, while the father will pay for the children's phones and computers.'

'Each home will provide each child with a weekly allowance of 10 euros.'

'We will buy one set of outdoor clothing at our shared expense. Either parent can buy more clothing at their own expense.'

'We will take care of the child's daily expenses on alternate weeks based on who is looking after the child each time. Any larger expenses will be written down, and all expenses will be divided equally at the end of the year. Child benefit will be paid into the mother's account, and the mother will transfer half of this amount to the father's account.'

'The child's train ticket to the other parent's house will be paid for by the parent seeing the child off.'

'If one of us becomes unemployed, we will renegotiate the sharing of expenses.'



## Maintenance agreement

You can also agree to share the maintenance responsibility for the child by drawing up a child maintenance agreement during an appointment with a child welfare officer. Child welfare officers provide assistance in drawing up a maintenance agreement, and they confirm it. When estimating the amount of maintenance, child welfare officers refer to instructions provided by the Ministry of Justice and calculate the amount based on these instructions. The calculation of maintenance includes an assessment of the child's need for maintenance and both parents' ability to provide maintenance. The assessment of the child's need for maintenance relies on the general Consumer Price Index, but the assessor can also take into account special expenses as well as expenses related to special hobbies, for example, if both parents consent to this.

The maintenance specified in the confirmed maintenance agreement is distrainable, i.e. a parent may apply for any unpaid maintenance to be paid through a distraint officer or the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela). A confirmed maintenance agreement is also a prerequisite for child maintenance allowance paid by Kela, which can be applied for when the parent liable for maintenance is insolvent. A confirmed maintenance agreement may also be a requirement for applying for social assistance. The amount of maintenance may affect taxes.

Shared parenting does not automatically mean that there is no need to pay maintenance. Child welfare officers will help you assess your situation.



Even if you have agreed on the sharing of the maintenance responsibility with a confirmed maintenance agreement, focusing solely on maintenance can draw your attention away from your child's needs.

If your own financial situation allows it, you can be flexible and fulfil the child's wish for a holiday or concert tickets, for example.



In addition to maintenance, the parents can also agree on other arrangements and write them down in the parenting plan, if they wish, but they cannot demand or require them from each other.

# The child's school and day care attendance

Children spend a great proportion of their waking hours at school or in day care. Therefore, it is important that the parents consider together how they can ensure smooth cooperation with the school or day care centre in a way that promotes the child's well-being. When going through a divorce or separation, the parents must also consider whether they will decide to move the child to another school or day care centre and whether this transfer must be carried out immediately or if it can be postponed to the end of the school year.

## Examples of entries written by parents:

'We both created Wilma accounts, and we will discuss things related to our child's schooling by e-mail. The father will attend parents' evenings and tell the mother about them. The father will also take care of any calls that need to be made to a teacher.'

'We will both try to participate in discussions on the early childhood education plan as well as parents' evenings at the day care centre. If only one of us can make it, they will tell the other about the matters discussed afterwards.'

'We will both participate in our children's Christmas and end of the school year celebrations. The mother will participate in any voluntary work events at the school, while the father will participate in field trips and their preparations.'

'We agreed that the mother will contact the day care centre and inform the staff about our separation.'

'The child will not change schools until next autumn. We will take him to school and back home from his after-school club on alternate weeks.'



## Other questions

You may also have other questions on your mind that should be discussed. They can be related to anything, such as the child's health care, maintaining the child's well-being or the child's first language, religion or culture. The child's special dispositions and hobbies should also be taken into account in the plan. It may sometimes be necessary to discuss what type of support will be arranged for the child to provide them with all the help they need to cope with the divorce or separation.

### Examples of entries written by parents:

'If one of us suspects that the child is distressed because of our separation, we both commit to seeking help for the child.'

'We will sign the child up for a divorce and separation support group for children, and we will take turns taking him to the group's meetings.'

'We will hold an annual discussion with our child's coach regarding the promotion of her skiing hobby.'

'In the future, the children will speak Finnish with their father and Spanish with their mother. The children will continue attending an English-language school.'



## For parents of teenagers

The parents should take their time considering and discussing with the teenager ways to preserve the things important to them. It is important to take the teenager's friends, hobbies and other activities meaningful to them into account when making new arrangements. They convey an important message to the teenager that they will still be part of something old and familiar even though changes are taking place in the family.

Teenagers themselves wonder about different living and meeting arrangements. Ask about and listen to the teenager's thoughts and what is on their mind. Teenagers also hope that the parents can be flexible with the meeting arrangements and take the teenager's other important plans into account.

When the family's children enter their teens, the parents face many new questions. Teenagers have more control over and bear more responsibility for their own lives, and the parents can make many agreements with them. What matters can teenagers decide for themselves? What matters will be left to the parents to decide? How and when will matters be discussed, and who will participate in these discussions? How will the parents let each other know what agreements have been made with the teenager?

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**In a teenager's life, ground rules and agreements are needed with regard to things such as:**

- study choices and schooling
- hobbies
- time spent outside and with friends
- curfews
- going to parties or festivals and attitudes towards intoxicants
- use of social media and playing videogames
- spending and purchases
- driver's licences

# Tips for discussions between parents

## Stay calm

- Even if the other parent's words sound unfair or distressing, it is best that you keep your wits about you. In a tough spot, the parts of our brains that are responsible for thought can easily turn off, and we start behaving thoughtlessly. At those times, we have an automatic reaction to things: we either start to fight or withdraw.
- Slowing down helps: take deep breaths, sip on water, count to ten, suggest a short break – do whatever you need to stop yourself from becoming agitated. This will allow you to regain control of your wits and be able to think.

## Learn to listen

- Focus on just listening – you cannot talk and listen at the same time.
- Listen first before speaking. The other person is more likely to listen to you if you yourself first let the other person speak uninterrupted.
- Take on a curious attitude – the other person may have unexpected points of view.

## Speak only for yourself

- Talk about what you think, need or feel – do not talk about what you assume or know that the other person is thinking.
- Say 'it makes me angry when you ask me about my finances in front of the kids' instead of 'do you always have to annoy me by asking me about my finances when you know very well that I hate that'.
- Do not turn the other person into an enemy – stay focused solely on resolving the matters concerning the children.
- A person cannot both feel threatened and be compassionate at the same time. Try to act in a manner that the other person does not feel threatened by, as then they can feel compassion towards you. Compassion enables you to look at things from a broader perspective and focus on the child's needs.

## Stay on topic and follow the ground rules

- Talk about one thing at a time.
- Express your requests clearly and simply.
- Try to hold a polite conversation, as though you were speaking to a colleague.
- When you feel tempted to interrupt, take a deep breath and wait patiently.
- If your discussion comes to a dead-end, take a time-out and a deep breath. Even if you wish that the other person would change their mind, consider what you yourself can do in the situation at hand.



# The most important thing is to allow the child to love

More information:  
[www.apuaeroon.fi](http://www.apuaeroon.fi)  
(in Finnish)



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