

A PARENTING PLAN?! WHY DO I NEED THAT?

So, you've been married for several years, you have three children, and you and your spouse realize that the marriage is over. After many discussions about divorce with your spouse, you meet with an attorney just to get some general information, and you are told, among other things, that you will eventually need to file a parenting plan. Feeling a bit overwhelmed, you rush out of the attorney's office wondering why everything has to be so complicated. What exactly is a parenting plan anyway, and why do you need one?

A parenting plan in a nutshell is a "plan" that you and your spouse develop that delineates how the two of you are going to raise your children, now that you are no longer married. It is not that different than the way you functioned during your intact marriage. Although during your marriage, you probably did not create a detailed, written document, you and your spouse had a system that the two of you created that more or less governed how you were going to raise your children. It included what schools you would send them to, what religion your children would practice, how your children would spend their holidays and vacations, and with what family members, what extracurricular activities your children would be involved in and which parent would be responsible for taking them there and bringing them home, among other things. In fact, your "plan" was the way that you organized your children's lives. Essentially, the parenting plan that you create now is not very different from the one you have been using throughout your marriage.

Now that you and your spouse will be living in separate households, the two of you must come up with a plan as to how you will continue to parent your children while keeping your *children's* best interest in mind. While traditional households typically have one parent who spends slightly more time with the children than the other parent, during an intact marriage, the children have access to both parents on a daily basis. The goal of the parenting plan you create once the marriage is over should be to create a plan that allows the children to have as much access to both parents as possible, without creating a chaotic lifestyle for the children.

The parenting plan will typically include a schedule that explains how the children's time will be divided up between mom's and dad's houses. In addition, it addresses contact and access, vacation time, extracurricular activities, and all of the other details described in paragraph two above. Remember, since the plan must be created with the *children's* best interest in mind, what you do not want to do is come up with a plan that just makes you happy.

So why do you need a parenting plan? Why can't you just go to court and tell the judge "we're going to work together" or "he can see the kids whenever he wants, he just has to call"? Well, while we would all attest to our high level of maturity and our ability to conduct ourselves in the most respectful manner even during extremely stressful times in our lives, the truth of the matter is that divorce can understandably bring out the edge in you. The children should not

have to be compromised because of that. Rather than have weekly disputes about whose turn it is to be with the children, you have a parenting plan that is clear and helps you, your children, and the court to have a clear understanding about every scheduling detail of your *children's* lives. ¹⁷



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