BIRTH THROUGH THREE

A Guide for Parents Creating Parenting Plans For Young Children

Prepared by Multnomah County
Family Court Services

In collaboration with the Parental Involvement & Outreach Subcommittee of the Oregon Statewide Family Law Advisory Committee

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The Question of Overnights

Why all the fuss about overnights?

Most parents know how important secure attachment is to a child's development. They often worry about separating a child from the attachment figure that has provided the child's primary care.

A child's ***attachment system*** (the need to be close to the attachment figure for safety and comfort) is triggered by threats of danger. Separation from the primary attachment figure or being alone and in the dark, like at bedtime, can be scary for a child. Both of these may happen when a child spends the night away from the residential parent.

If care-giving is not warm and responsive or if the child is not able to reconnect with the primary attachment figure often enough to be comforted, the child may feel more stress. Chronic stress can harm a child's developing brain. Parents must be sensitive to how a child is handling time away from a primary attachment figure.

It is helpful to have stable, calming bedtime routines for children. Sensitive parenting and supportive routines help a child relax, feel safe, maintain attachment, and get the sleep they need to be healthy and happy (instead of grumpy!).

Should infants or children under three have overnights in the other parent's home?

This is a question researchers have spent a lot of time studying. Some experts believe that it is not harmful for infants to have overnights with the nonresidential parent. They believe that overnights can increase the bond to the nonresidential parent, as well as the nonresidential parent's commitment to the child.

Other experts believe that separating an infant from a primary attachment figure for overnights too long or too often may be harmful. They point to findings that infants with frequent (once a week or more) overnights show more distress, and are more irritable and worried about being separated from their primary caregiver than children mostly in the care of one parent.

So what should parents do?

There is no clear, simple, one-size-fits-all answer for parents. At this point, we do not know for certain that overnights have either a negative or positive effect on young children. Instead, parents should think carefully about their situation when deciding about overnights and parenting time for young children.

"Top ten" things to think about when deciding about overnights…

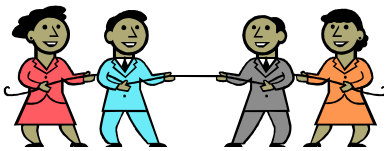
1. ***Who does your child rely on most for comfort?*** Who is your child most likely to go to when upset, hurt, sick, or woken up in the middle of the night? Does your child respond the same or differently to each of you? This is a tough question for parents. Be honest for the sake of your child.

2. ***What were your caretaking behaviors and roles before the separation/divorce?*** What were each of your roles in caring for your child in during the day and at night, things like bathing, diapering, feeding, playing with, and putting a child down to sleep? Did you live together as parents and share in the care of the child?

3. ***What are your skills as parents?*** What are your parenting strengths and weaknesses? What are you or the other parent still learning? How might you help the other parent develop skills to benefit your child? Think about making a schedule that uses the best of each of your skills.

4. ***What is your child like?*** How does your child deal with change and new situations? Some children need more routine and get easily stressed when schedules and surroundings change. Other children are more flexible and adjust to changes more easily. The less flexible child may struggle to adjust to differences in sleeping, eating, bathing and other routines between two homes.

5. ***What is the level of conflict between you and the other parent?*** Some conflict is normal during separation and divorce. However, children exposed to high levels of conflict feel more anxiety before, during and after exchanges. If there is high conflict, the stress can have lasting negative effects on a child. Parents who have conflict need to develop plans that reduce children's exposure. If arguments regularly happen during exchanges, think about ways to have less face-to-face contact, like using a third party or childcare setting for exchanges.



Many parents who have high conflict reduce children's exposure by practicing *parallel parenting* which limits the amount of contact they need to have with the other parent. Each parent does things their way on their time. Parallel parenting is not ideal for consistency, but it is much better than exposing your child to on-going conflict.

6. ***How well do you and the other parent communicate?*** Routine and consistency are important for young children. Your child will do better if you and the

other parent share information about things like bedtimes and meal times, food likes and dislikes, illnesses, toilet training, and new abilities of your child. If your communication with the other parent is not where you would like it to be, think about a notebook that travels back and forth with your child's things. The notebook can share important information and details about your child (see the "Sample Co-Parent Communication Log" in the back of this handbook).

7. ***Does your child have special needs?*** A child with colic, sensory issues, or other medical conditions can quickly sap your physical and emotional strength. If you are both skilled at meeting your child's special needs, it may help to create a plan that gives each of you a chance for a break. Sometimes only one parent has the patience and time needed to care for the child. If that is true in your situation, it is important to build a network of resources and ask for help when you need it.

   Children with special needs may be more affected by going back and forth between two homes or more at risk for attachment disruptions.

8. ***Is there a history of domestic violence?*** Young children that are around domestic violence are at risk of having their development harmed. The fear and stress that exists in a home where there is violence places the child's attachment system in danger. Some studies show that children exposed to domestic violence have more mental health problems than children who experienced other forms of abuse**.** ***In many states, including Oregon, abusing a partner when a child is present is a serious crime.***

   If you and/or your children have experienced domestic violence, safety must be the first priority. ***Safety focused parenting plans*** can help provide safer contact between a parent and a child and reduce the risk of future violence. Safety focused plans include a many options, from safe public exchange locations to professionally supervised parenting time. *More information and resources for parents that have experienced domestic violence is in the resources guide in the back of this handbook.*

9. ***Do you or the other parent have serious problems that affect parenting?*** A parent with untreated addiction, mental illness, or other serious problems with day-to-day functioning is probably not able to respond consistently to the needs of an infant or young child. In addition, a parent with these struggles may be in and out of a child's life, which damages the bond between that parent and child. Just like with domestic violence, safety-focused parenting plan options can apply to these situations.

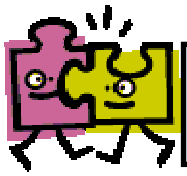
10. ***How do you think your plan will feel for your child?*** How will your child react to sleeping in two or more homes? Is your child familiar

with both homes? Will your child need some time to get used to the new home? How long will your child have to travel to get back and forth between your homes. How does she handle these trips? What would make your child feel more comfortable and secure?

If you can answer most of these questions in a positive way, your child may be in good shape to have overnights with the nonresidential parent. We will talk more about how to transition young children to overnights away and what to watch for later in this handbook.

When a parent needs more skills or a child has problems or special needs, a parent can build skills and a child can build comfort by spending more frequent time with each other during the day.

Either way, it is important for you and the other parent to notice how your child is doing. Watch for signs of serious distress (see "Signs of Distress" in the next section). Be ready to pull back or slow down if needed, and be careful not to overreact to normal distress.



Remember - There **is no clear, simple, one-size-fits-all parenting plan!**