

Shared Parenting for Children

Whose parents are not married to each other



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Introduction

A significant number of children whose parents are not married to each other are raised by their mothers alone. However, it is important for children to know that they have two parents and to know who their parents are.

Fathers, as well as mothers, are very special to their children and it is important for children that, where possible, both parents take a positive parenting role in the lives of their children and exercise their responsibilities to their children. Just because a relationship between parents is over this should not mean that one parent disappears out of the child's life or mind.

Children in all families benefit from the ongoing affection, interest and concern of both their parents. When parents support their child's relationship with the other parent, they are promoting their child's right to an independent and meaningful relationship with each parent.

What are the advantages of shared parenting?

- Shared parenting gives children the possibility of a nurturing relationship with both parents and their extended families.
- Children have the assurance that both parents still love them even though the parents are not living together.
- It reassures children that they have two parents and although they live in separate places, the children have a home with each of them.

- One parent is not unfairly burdened with the responsibility of discipline while the other becomes merely the fun or contact parent.

How does shared parenting work?

Successful shared parenting does not happen by chance. It takes work. It needs parents to:

- co-operate,
- be patient,
- communicate,
- put to one side their anger or hurt
- put their children's welfare before their own comfort,
- acknowledge that their children want and need both parents
- develop a new co-operative, parenting relationship with the other parent.

Shared parenting can work well if it is child-focused, rather than adult-focused. The essential element is the goodwill and determination of the parents to make it work.

Make a parenting plan

A parenting plan is a way of sorting out parenting arrangements. A parenting plan sets out how to share time with the children, how to manage responsibilities, and how to make decisions about the children.

School arrangements, childcare, holidays, and pocket money can all be part of a parenting plan. Times can all be arranged for telephone calls, discussions around money or child rearing, strategies for dealing with differences of opinion if they arise.

A Parenting Plan:

- provides continuity and security for children in their relationship with each parent,
- means the children will know when they will be with each of you
- provides a structure so everyone is clear about future living arrangements
- helps to reduce conflict.

A written plan works best. It makes for clarity and certainty while allowing parents to write into it provisions for flexibility and dealing with the unexpected.

Top Tips

- If you have difficulty reaching an agreement you may need the help of a mediator who can assist you in reaching your own agreement. Children need information on the arrangements. Changes or cancellations should be explained well in advance.
- Be on time for the children and plan the beginning and end of time carefully with the other parent as everyone can be on edge at these times.
- Don't use the children's handover time to sort out problems with the other parent.
- Don't introduce a new partner too soon. Your time with your children is precious.
- Do not encourage gossip and tale telling - don't expect children to be a spy in the other camp, bringing back secrets.
- Help the children's other parent to feel responsible and involved as a parent. You could send copies

of school reports and photos. Try to work out which parent goes to what school event (or even go together) as leaving it to chance can be upsetting for children. What matters most is that someone is watching, applauding, listening to their talk, meeting their friends, and sharing the day with them.

- Children need to feel at home in both homes by having their place in the family acknowledged. Having their own toothbrush, duvet, toys and books is a sign that they belong and are not merely visiting.
- Ensure that your children know they can ask questions without fear of rejection or feeling disloyal.
- Contact with other family members, such as grandparents, can also be very beneficial for children.
- If the other parent lives far away they can keep contact through email, letters, photos, a voice on the phone etc.
- If children are having regular contact with both parents then it is worth bearing in mind that some other people need to know this, for example teachers, club leaders etc. Teachers should also know who should and should not see or collect children and also who should be told or consulted about school matters.
- Most importantly be positive about your children. They are unique and important human beings. Children's confidence and self esteem blossom when they hear good things about themselves and those close to them.

Positive pointers for shared parenting

Parenting is a job for life and for children there is no such thing as an ex-parent.

- Children recognise the importance of a continuing relationship or link with both parents, no matter how distant. Remember that it is not adding people to children's lives but taking important people away that is hard for children to accept.
- Children need to know that it is all right for them to love both parents and to like or love step-parents.
- Try to come to terms with the fact that your children may have a relationship with their other parent over which you have no control. You need to respect each other's parenting style. Adults need to separate their parenting relationship with their children from the relationship (or lack of one) they have with each other. Don't let your own unresolved emotions get in the way and do not involve your children in parental conflict. Make a time to discuss disagreements and not in front of the children.

Need help?

- **Mediation** - where a third party helps parents reach an agreement. It encourages parents to co-operate with each other in working out the details of shared parenting.

Family Mediation Service:

01 - 874 7446 / www.legalaid.ie

The Mediators' Institute of Ireland: 01

- 609 9190 / www.themil.ie

Collaborative law - where parents work with specially trained lawyers, receive legal advice and guidance and together with the lawyers, discuss and attempt to resolve issues through face-to-face meetings.

Association of Collaborative Practitioners:

www.acp.ie

Legal Aid Board: LoCall: 1890 615

200 www.legalaidboard.ie

Get a copy of Family Links - positive pointers for lone parents who are helping their children to understand their family situation - from Treoir. It's free. Order at 01 670 0120 or www.treoir.ie

If you would like to talk through your individual situation, call Treoir on our confidential helpline at: 01 670 0120



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