

## **Parenting Plan Considerations - Long Distance Parents Who Live More than 100 Miles Apart**

### **In General**

- What is fair and equal for the parents is not necessarily what is best for the child.
- The aim of these visitation guidelines is to build positive relationships between the parents and the child.
- Moving too quickly into lengthy visits could have an opposite, potentially disruptive, effect on the relationship-building process.
- When parents are in conflict, parents need to consider a neutral transition plan so their child is protected from the distress parental conflict can cause.
- Parents must consider their children's individual needs when they develop shared parenting arrangements. Children differ in how they cope with change and adjust to their parents' separation.
- If you have more than one child, you may need a different schedule for each. For example, a schedule that works well for an eight year old, may not work for a teenager. If this is the case, you may want a schedule that allows all of your children to be together at certain times.
- When a parent has not been an active parent prior to separation, the initial parenting plan should allow that parent enough time to develop a relationship with the child. As the parent-child bond strengthens, changes can be made to the plan.
- Parents who have been away or absent for a length of time (perhaps in the military or because of job requirements) need to build trust gradually with their children, so their children have an opportunity to get to know them.

### **Birth to Eighteen Months**

- When a child is in infancy, if conflict is low between parents, it is recommended that one of the parents travel in either direction to enable both parents to spend time with the child. The non-residential parent should go to where the infant resides and/or the residential parent may travel with the infant to the vicinity of the distant parent. Consider contact at least once every two months.
- During the visit, establish a schedule that allows short, but frequent contact with the infant. Perhaps two visits a day, one to two hours each, gradually increasing to two, four hour blocks each day. Visitation could continue for several days in a row.
- Out-of-state visits, lengthily overnights, and vacations with the non-residential parent are strongly urged against during this early process.

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### **Eighteen Months to Three Years**

- When a child is in the toddler stage, it is recommended that one of the parents travel in either direction to enable both parents to spend time with the child. Either the non-residential parent should go to where the toddler resides and/or the residential parent may travel with the toddler to the vicinity of the distant parent. Consider contact at least once every two months.
- If the visiting parent has not had significant contact with the child, consider starting with two visits a day, three to four hours each. Gradually increase contact to one visit a day, up to eight hours. After three days of consecutive visits of eight hours, one overnight can be added. Visitation could be several days in a row.
- Out-of-state visits, lengthily overnights, and vacations with the non-residential parent are strongly urged against during this early process.

### **Three to Six Years**

- At this age, it is advisable that one of the parents travels to the residence of the other parent.
- Visitation could be one weekend a month and should consist of a two to three day maximum stay with the visiting parent. When the distant parent travels to the primary parent's residence, this means that the visit may take place at a hotel or the home of a local friend.
- Where it is difficult for parents to travel each month, parents can do up to four days in a row, up to six times a year.
- Regular phone contact is encouraged with little expectation of reciprocity by the child. During the visitation, the child should be allowed regular phone contact with the home base parent, also with little expectation of reciprocity. Young children may only be expected to talk on the telephone for short periods of time, one to five minutes, typically. Use of technology, is recommended where the parent and child can see one another and the child can play while interacting. See note below.\*

### **Six to Nine Years**

- At this age, children can tolerate out-of-state visitation in the other parent's home.
- Visits can be frequent, but should be no longer than two weeks at a time.
- At this age, an entire summer is too long to be away from the home base parent.
- Regular phone contact should be established. During the visitation, the child should have ample opportunity to maintain contact with the residential parent.

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### **Nine to Thirteen Years**

- At this age, summer visits may be increased to four to six weeks in one block of time.
- Additional holiday visitation may include half the Christmas break, all of spring break, Thanksgiving break and President's Day weekend.
- Regular phone contact should be established. During the visitation, the child should have ample opportunity to maintain contact with the residential parent.

### **Thirteen to Seventeen Years**

- Adolescents should be able to give input as to what goes into the visitation plan.
- At this age, children can tolerate a variety of visitation schedules. It might be necessary to review the visitation on a yearly basis.
- The decision as to whether or not they visit a parent should not be entirely the child's.
- The distant parent should not call too often, rather give ample permission for the child to call them.

**\*NOTE:** With today's technology, it is possible for the distant parent to maintain a closer relationship. Instant Messaging, Skype, or similar means could be used. Many of these services are free. Phone conversations can be more meaningful when the child and parent can see each other while they talk. The distant parent could help children with their homework or work on projects together. They could even play games together. For the younger children, they have the advantage of "seeing" the distant parent on a regular basis. Parents are encouraged to read a book on long-distance parenting for more ideas.

During extended visitation with the distant parent, the residential parent should be afforded the same contact.