

Considering an Equal Parenting Plan Arrangement?

Having an equal amount of time with each parent can be a positive experience for a child whose parents are not together; studies have shown the importance of frequent and continuing contact between a parent and a child and the long-lasting benefit to a child when both parents are actively involved with them. However, if time with the child is shared in a way that is not age-appropriate, if conflict between the parents is high, or if communication between the parents is weak, children may have difficulties with an equal timesharing plan.

These factors help determine if 50/50 is the best arrangement for your child/ren

Think about the items listed below before you arrange an equal timeshare schedule

The Current and Previous Arrangement – Who has traditionally been the primary parent caring for the child? What is the arrangement, now? If both parents have been equally involved from the start, 50/50 makes more sense. It takes time and consistency for children to form a bond with their parents. The more frequently a parent cuddles, feeds, bathes, reads to, plays with, and in other ways cares for a child, the stronger their bond becomes. If one parent has done all the caretaking while the other has been hardly involved at all, a 50/50 timeshare can be a goal to work towards gradually, but should not begin until the child and the less involved parent are truly ready. A less involved parent needs to take time to form a good system of caring for their child, in smaller chunks of time, before taking on the responsibility of a 50/50 schedule. Parent/child bonding is the most important factor in determining if 50/50 is a good fit for you and your child.

Your Child's Age – Do you have a very young child, or a teenager? The younger your child, the more important it is for attachment and bonding that the child see both parents on a frequent basis. Younger children and infants need to see and spend time with each parent as much as *every day* to encourage bonding. If you plan to share equal time with a young child or an infant, your child may have to spend lots of time in transition between houses; this may not be optimal, or even possible. It is not in a young child's best interests to be apart from a parent for much longer than the child's age. Therefore, a one year old should generally not be away from a primary caretaker (mom or dad) for longer than one day or so. Older children, especially teenagers, sometimes find it difficult to be away from their "base" and often prefer to have one main home; their friends know where to find them, they have access to all their "stuff", and they feel more settled with one home. Even teens who have been in a 50/50 arrangement for many years may ask to live full time with dad or mom at a certain age. Parents also need to consider how having access to two homes could be used by a teenager to sneak off from school, have a party, or engage in other high risk behaviors.

Your Communication and Cooperation with the Other Parent – How do you and the other parent communicate? Is there tension? Do you avoid one another? Having two, equally responsible parents in a 50/50 arrangement, takes a good deal of work and cooperation. If you and the other parent are not on speaking terms, this type of arrangement may end up hurting your child. If you and the other parent are frequently in conflict with one another, the risk of your child being exposed to your fights is higher when parents share equal time. It is never in a child's best interest to be exposed to parental conflict. Honestly think about how willing you are to be in frequent, perhaps even daily contact with the child's other parent. If you both are good at being at the child's functions at the same time, sharing information with the other parent, etc., then an equal timeshare arrangement may work for your child.

The Distance Between the Parents' Homes – When parents live too far apart, it can create complications for children. How do they have sleep-overs, playdates, get to and from school? Is it possible to easily get the child's school bag from mom's house, or the child's special outfit from dad's when parents are far apart? Is one parent always challenged to get the child to soccer practice, after school events, or other functions? What happens if your child is sick or injured and needs to be picked up from school and you're far away at work? 50/50 is not good idea when parents live in different communities, due to the added pressure of the distance between the parents.

Your Child's Temperament – Some children are very easy going and do well with constantly changing circumstances. Other children need predictable routines and consistency to function well. If you have a child who needs consistency, an equal timeshare can be tricky. Also consider how each of you interacts with your child. Some children are a better fit temperamentally with mom or dad and it may be healthier for that parent to have primary custody, and for the other parent to spend good quality time with the child without fear of ruining the bond.

Your Child's Needs – Also consider any special needs your child has, such as medical equipment, tutoring, medications, counseling, team practices, etc. If both parents ensure that the child gets to their regular appointments and has their equipment or medications for them in each home, it will make a 50/50 schedule more successful.

Your Availability – Do you work nights, on call, or have a greater than 40-hour work week? It is good to want to be with your children and share equal responsibility of raising them. However, if your child will spend the majority of “your time” in day care, while the other parent is available to be with them, this is probably not the best situation for the child. If, on the other hand, you and the other parent have opposite work schedules, using one another as daycare during your work hours is a terrific way to allow the children equal time with each parent during the hours each parent is available. When both parents have similar work schedules, 50/50 can also work reasonably well.

Domestic Violence/Substance Abuse/Child Abuse – If there is a history of abuse, it is not recommended that parents share the children equally. When a restraining order exists, California Rules of Court state that *even when parents agree*, they may not share Joint Legal Custody or Joint Physical Custody unless a Judicial Officer orders otherwise. Extreme parental conflict has been proven to be traumatic and harmful to children; a 50/50 timeshare can expose them to further trauma. If a parent had problems with substance abuse or child abuse, these issues must be treated well before a 50/50 arrangement could begin; the added stress of full-time parenting may trigger relapse.

Typical Types of 50/50 Parenting Plan Arrangements

If you've considered all of the above and believe your child would benefit from sharing equal time with each parent, use the types of arrangements, below, to guide you to the right 50/50 schedule. The younger the child is, the shorter the duration of days with each parent should be.

Rotating 1-day, 2-day, or 3-day – In this arrangement, parents alternate responsibility of the child in blocks of one, two or three days at a time. The days of the week that the child is with each parent will change from week to week. For example, one parent would have the child Sunday and Monday, then the other would have the child Tuesday and Wednesday, then the first parent would have Thursday and Friday, then the second parent would have Saturday and Sunday, etc. The advantage of this schedule is that it is best for young children who need to see and be with each parent more frequently. The main problems with this arrangement are that it is hard to plan ahead when the schedule varies so much, and children can tend to feel unsettled. For a child that has trouble with transitions and/or adjustment, this type of day-on, day-off schedule may be too stressful.

3/2/2/3 – This arrangement ensures a full weekend for each parent every other week, while also giving the child shorter durations apart from each parent. An example of this schedule is that on week one, the child is with Dad on Monday and Tuesday, and Friday to Sunday, and with Mom Wednesday and Thursday. On week two the child is with Dad on Wednesday and Thursday, and with Mom on Monday and Tuesday and Friday to Sunday. There are more transitions, but fewer days between contact. This schedule may be appropriate for children ages 2 and up.

3/4/4/3 – In this arrangement, there is only one day that changes back and forth between the parents on a weekly rotation. Typically in this timesharing plan, each parent will have one weekend day and two weekdays closest to the weekend day. Wednesday is then alternated. For example, Mother has the child every week from Sunday through Tuesday, and Wednesday every other week, while Father has the child Thursday through Saturday, and Wednesday every other week. This schedule is usually acceptable for children ages 3 and up.

Week-on, Week-off with a mid-week visit – The rotating week-on, week-off schedule usually starts on Fridays after school, to simplify who is in charge of homework assignments for the week, but the start of the week can be any day that works best. A mid-week visit for the parent that does not have the week helps the time between contact to be shortened from 7 days to only 3.5. If the week starts on Friday, a Monday evening or Monday overnight visit helps the children to reconnect with mom or dad. This arrangement is generally acceptable for children ages 3+.

5/2/2/5 – This arrangement gives each parent two designated days per week, plus the full weekend from Friday through Sunday, every other week; a parent will have the child for two days one week and five days the next week. For example, Mother would have the child every Monday and Tuesday, Father would have the child every Wednesday and Thursday, and the parents would alternate having the child every other Friday through Sunday. This arrangement is generally acceptable for children aged 5 and up.

Week-on, Week-off – The rotating week-on, week-off schedule usually starts on Fridays after school, to simplify who is in charge of homework assignments for the week, but the start of the week can be any day that works best. This schedule allows for long periods of uninterrupted time for the parent and child to feel settled in between transitions from one home to the other. This arrangement is generally acceptable for older children, aged 7+.