



Co-Parenting Guide

2024

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	4
THE BASICS OF CO-PARENTING	4
DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF CO-PARENTING	4
WHY EFFECTIVE CO-PARENTING MATTERS	4
CO-PARENTING STYLES: COOPERATIVE, PARALLEL, AND CONFLICTED	5
BENEFITS FOR THE CHILD AND THE PARENTS	6
SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.....	6
THE COMPONENTS OF CO-PARENTING	7
CLARITY IN PARENTING ROLES.....	7
CREATING A FAIR DIVISION OF LABOUR	7
IDENTIFYING EACH PARENT’S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES	8
CRAFTING A PARENTING SCHEDULE	9
MANAGING HOLIDAYS, BIRTHDAYS, AND VACATIONS	9
DEALING WITH LAST-MINUTE SCHEDULE CHANGES.....	10
FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	11
CHILD MAINTENANCE	13
IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES IN CO-PARENTING	16
MANAGING AND MAINTAINING EFFECTIVE CO-PARENTING	18
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR CO-PARENTING	18
HANDLING CONFLICT BETWEEN CO-PARENTS	21
DEALING WITH A DIFFICULT CO-PARENT.....	23
SEEKING MEDIATION WHEN NECESSARY	25
HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICTS CALMLY IN CO-PARENTING.....	26
AVOIDING EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS DURING CO-PARENTING COMMUNICATION	27
HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO CO-PARENTING	27
HELPING CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR EMOTIONS	29
DEALING WITH CHILD’S RESISTANCE OR LOYALTY CONFLICTS.....	30
MANAGING FEELINGS OF GUILT IN CHILDREN	31
AVOIDING PUTTING THE CHILD IN THE MIDDLE.....	32
INTEGRATING NEW RELATIONSHIPS OR STEP-PARENTS.....	33
HANDLING RELOCATIONS OR SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS	34
ADAPTING TO CHANGES IN YOUR CHILD’S NEEDS AS THEY GROW.....	35
PRACTICAL TIPS TO BUILD A BLENDED FAMILY	36
A CHILD’S GUIDE TO CO-PARENTING	38
TEMPLATES FOR CO-PARENTS	40
MANAGING CHILD-RELATED EXPENSES WORKSHEET	40
JOINT VS. INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS WORKSHEET.....	43
PARENTING SCHEDULE WORKSHEET	46
CO-PARENTING BOUNDARIES WORKSHEET	49

CO-PARENTING PLAN..... 52
CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING..... 56
WORKSHEETS FOR CHILDREN 58
 FEELINGS WORKSHEET: EXPRESSING EMOTIONS ABOUT CO-PARENTING 58
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES 60

Introduction

This document has been developed by NICRO at the request of our beneficiaries. It is being made available to the general public as part of our crime and violence prevention service. Individuals and organisations may make use of this document for non-profit and educational purposes.

This guide is divided into two sections: a reader containing tips and advice, and a section containing templates and worksheets for parents and children.

The Basics of Co-Parenting

DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF CO-PARENTING

Co-parenting refers to the shared responsibility of raising a child by two parents who are no longer romantically involved. This approach emphasizes collaboration and teamwork, ensuring that both parents remain actively involved in the child's life. Co-parenting is important because:

- It helps maintain a strong, ongoing bond between the child and both parents.
- It provides emotional stability, reducing the negative impact of separation or divorce.
- It fosters a positive environment, where children can thrive even when their parents are living apart.

Effective co-parenting prioritizes the child's well-being over personal conflicts, allowing both parents to focus on their role in supporting the child's development.

WHY EFFECTIVE CO-PARENTING MATTERS

Effective co-parenting is crucial because it creates a stable, supportive environment for children after a separation or divorce. By maintaining a positive relationship between co-parents, children can experience emotional security, reduced stress, and a stronger sense of continuity between homes. When parents work together, they model healthy communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork, which helps children adjust to the changes in their family structure.

CO-PARENTING STYLES: COOPERATIVE, PARALLEL, AND CONFLICTED

COOPERATIVE CO-PARENTING	PARALLEL CO-PARENTING	CONFLICTED CO-PARENTING
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This style involves high communication and collaboration between parents.• Both work together to make joint decisions, coordinate schedules, and maintain similar rules across households.• Cooperative co-parenting is the ideal scenario as it promotes consistency and emotional security for the child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents maintain limited communication and focus on running their households independently.• They make decisions separately for their time with the child, with minimal coordination.• While less ideal than cooperative co-parenting, it can work when parents find it difficult to communicate without conflict but still prioritize the child's well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Characterized by ongoing disputes, poor communication, and a lack of cooperation between parents.• This style negatively affects the child's emotional health, causing them stress and confusion.• Moving away from a conflicted relationship is key to effective co-parenting.

BENEFITS FOR THE CHILD AND THE PARENTS

FOR THE CHILD	FOR THE PARENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• EMOTIONAL SECURITY: When children see both parents cooperating, they feel more secure and less anxious about the changes in their family.• CONSISTENT ROUTINES: Co-parenting helps establish regular routines, giving children a sense of stability between both households.• HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS: Effective co-parenting fosters positive relationships between the child and both parents, minimizing feelings of guilt or the need to “choose sides.”• BETTER DEVELOPMENT: Children tend to perform better academically, socially, and emotionally when their parents work together, reducing conflict.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• REDUCED STRESS: Clear communication and shared responsibilities reduce tension and stress, making co-parenting more manageable.• BALANCED RESPONSIBILITY: Both parents contribute to the child’s upbringing, ensuring neither feels overwhelmed with all the responsibilities.• HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIPS: Co-parenting sets the stage for positive communication and problem-solving, creating a smoother relationship between the parents post-separation.• FOCUS ON THE CHILD: By prioritizing the child’s well-being, parents avoid unnecessary conflicts, allowing them to concentrate on what truly matters.

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

In any co-parenting arrangement, setting realistic expectations is crucial. Separation can bring emotional and logistical challenges, and expecting perfection can lead to frustration. By setting realistic expectations, co-parents can build a more harmonious relationship that benefits everyone involved, especially the child.

- **ACCEPTING IMPERFECTION:** Understand that both parents will make mistakes; what matters is maintaining the child’s well-being and learning from those mistakes.
- **BEING FLEXIBLE:** Life changes, and so should your co-parenting arrangement. Be open to adjusting schedules or approaches as the child’s needs evolve.
- **FOCUSING ON THE CHILD:** Keep personal conflicts aside and centre your efforts on what’s best for the child, even if it means compromising with the other parent.

The Components of Co-Parenting

CLARITY IN PARENTING ROLES

Having clear parenting roles is essential for successful co-parenting. When both parents understand their responsibilities and expectations, it reduces conflict, enhances collaboration, and ensures that the child's needs are met effectively. Here's how to establish clarity in parenting roles:

1. DEFINE KEY PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

- Identify the Core Areas: Key areas might include education, healthcare, discipline, extracurricular activities, transportation, and daily routines (e.g., bedtime, meals).
- Clarify Decision-Making Roles: Determine which decisions need to be made jointly (e.g., medical care, education choices) and which can be handled independently by one parent (e.g., day-to-day decisions).
- Document the Roles: Having a written document outlining these responsibilities can prevent misunderstandings and provide clarity for both parents.

2. ALIGN ON MAJOR PARENTING PHILOSOPHIES

- Agree on Discipline and Rules: To provide consistency for the child, both parents should be on the same page regarding discipline methods, screen time rules, bedtime, and homework policies.
- Be Consistent Between Households: While each household may have slight variations, major decisions like curfew, educational expectations, and behavioural standards should align to prevent confusion for the child.

3. MAINTAIN FLEXIBILITY

- Adapt When Needed: Life changes, and so do responsibilities. Both parents should remain flexible when unexpected events occur, such as changes in work schedules, illness, or emergencies. The ability to pivot without conflict is key to successful co-parenting.

CREATING A FAIR DIVISION OF LABOUR

Ensuring a fair division of parenting tasks helps avoid burnout and resentment. When responsibilities are shared equitably, both parents can feel more engaged and supported in their roles.

1. EVALUATE EXISTING WORKLOADS

- **List Current Tasks:** Create a list of all parenting duties, such as school drop-offs, doctor's appointments, meal prep, homework help, and extracurricular activities.
- **Consider Other Responsibilities:** Factor in work commitments, household duties, and personal time for each parent. This gives a clear picture of what each parent is already doing and where adjustments may be needed.

2. CREATE AN EQUITABLE SCHEDULE

- **Split Tasks Based on Availability:** Assign duties based on who has more time or flexibility during certain days or weeks. For example, if one parent has a more

predictable work schedule, they might handle more of the routine tasks, while the other parent takes on duties during weekends or evenings.

- **Reassess Periodically:** Life circumstances change, so it's important to periodically review the division of labour and adjust as needed. As children grow older, their needs change too, which might require shifts in responsibilities.

3. BALANCE MAJOR AND MINOR TASKS

- **Avoid Imbalance:** Ensure that one parent doesn't end up doing all the smaller, more frequent tasks (e.g., laundry, homework help), while the other only handles major events (e.g., school meetings or vacations). This can lead to an uneven distribution of labour.
- **Respect Each Parent's Contribution:** Both major and minor tasks are equally important in raising a child. Both parents should acknowledge and respect the efforts the other is making, even if one parent's tasks are less visible.

IDENTIFYING EACH PARENT'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of each parent allows for a more effective division of parenting tasks. By playing to each parent's strengths, you can ensure a well-balanced co-parenting partnership.

1. ASSESS STRENGTHS IN PARENTING STYLES

- **Identify Natural Skills:** One parent may excel at organizing school events and managing a schedule, while the other might be better at handling emotional support or creative activities. Discuss and leverage these strengths.
- **Use Skills to Your Advantage:** For example, if one parent is great with handling medical issues or attending appointments, they can take charge of health-related decisions, while the other handles educational tasks.

2. RECOGNIZE WEAKNESSES AND SET EXPECTATIONS

- **Be Honest About Limitations:** If one parent struggles with certain tasks (e.g., managing finances for school-related costs or staying on top of homework), it's important to be honest and find a way to delegate or support that weakness.
- **Provide Support Where Needed:** Recognizing a weakness doesn't mean the other parent has to take over completely. Offering support, such as reminders or dividing the task into smaller, manageable parts, can help alleviate stress for both parents.

3. COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER'S PARENTING STYLES

- **Find a Balance:** If one parent is more strict while the other is more laid-back, find a middle ground that benefits the child. Different parenting styles can complement each other, but both parents need to communicate and agree on how to approach different situations.
- **Leverage Emotional Strengths:** If one parent is more empathetic or emotionally attuned, they may be better at handling the child's emotional needs during challenging times. The other parent may be more effective at setting rules and routines, offering structure when needed.

CRAFTING A PARENTING SCHEDULE

A child-centred, flexible schedule is essential for ensuring that your child's needs remain the priority while both co-parents can share time and responsibilities. The focus should be on creating a routine that supports the child's well-being, stability, and happiness.

1. PRIORITIZE THE CHILD'S ROUTINE AND NEEDS

- **Keep Stability in Mind:** Children thrive on routine, so it's important to build a schedule that maintains consistency in their daily activities, like school, homework, bedtime, and extracurriculars.
- **Consider Developmental Stages:** The child's age, schooling, and social activities should guide the schedule. For younger children, stability and frequent transitions may be more important, whereas older children might have busier school and social calendars to accommodate.

2. DEVELOP A STRUCTURED BASE SCHEDULE

- **Start with Weekdays and Weekends:** Determine where the child will be on school days versus weekends. Some common arrangements are alternating weekends or splitting the week (e.g., one parent has the child Monday to Wednesday, and the other has Thursday to Sunday).
- **Share Important Daily Tasks:** If both parents are close in proximity, consider sharing responsibilities like school drop-offs, pick-ups, or attending extracurricular activities.

3. ALLOW FLEXIBILITY

- **Build in Flex Time:** Leave room in the schedule for adjustments due to unexpected events, such as school projects, sports events, or changes in work schedules. Flexibility prevents conflict when changes are necessary.
- **Prepare for Changes in the Child's Life:** As your child grows, their activities and social circles will evolve, which will likely require adjusting the schedule over time. Be open to reworking the routine to fit new circumstances.

1. SCHEDULE REGULAR CHECK-INS

- **Review the Schedule Periodically:** Set regular times (e.g., every six months) to review the schedule with your co-parent. This ensures that both parents are on the same page and can address any evolving needs.

MANAGING HOLIDAYS, BIRTHDAYS, AND VACATIONS

Special occasions like holidays, birthdays, and vacations often require extra coordination between co-parents. Establishing clear guidelines in advance helps avoid misunderstandings and allows the child to enjoy these events with both parents.

1. ALTERNATE OR SHARE MAJOR HOLIDAYS

- **Alternate Yearly:** A common approach is to alternate major holidays each year (e.g., one parent has Christmas in even years, and the other has Christmas in odd years).
- **Split the Day:** For holidays like Easter or Christmas, some co-parents choose to split the day so that the child spends part of the day with each parent. This works best when parents live near each other and can coordinate smoothly.

- **Consider Traditions:** Acknowledge each parent’s family traditions and try to accommodate them. If one parent’s family has a long-standing tradition on a specific holiday, consider allowing them that day and making up time with the other parent at a different time.

2. PLAN VACATIONS IN ADVANCE

- **Set Vacation Timeframes:** Decide how vacation time will be divided. For example, each parent might get two weeks of uninterrupted vacation time with the child during the summer or school breaks.
- **Communicate Early:** Notify the other parent well in advance of vacation plans to avoid scheduling conflicts. Be clear about dates, locations, and contact information during the trip.
- **Respect the Other Parent’s Time:** Avoid planning vacations that interfere with the other parent’s scheduled time, unless both parents agree to the change.

3. CELEBRATE BIRTHDAYS COOPERATIVELY

- **Consider Joint Celebrations:** If possible, co-parents can celebrate the child’s birthday together, especially for younger children who may feel more comfortable having both parents present.
- **Alternate or Split the Day:** If a joint celebration isn’t feasible, alternate who gets the child on their birthday each year, or split the day so both parents can spend time celebrating.
- **Celebrate on Different Days:** When necessary, one parent can celebrate the child’s birthday the day before or after the actual date, allowing both parents to have meaningful time with the child.

4. CREATE A HOLIDAY AND VACATION PLAN IN WRITING

- **Put It in the Co-Parenting Plan:** Write down holiday, birthday, and vacation agreements in your co-parenting plan to minimize future disputes.
- **Adjust for Special Events:** Be open to switching holidays or vacation time when special events arise, such as family reunions, weddings, or graduations.

DEALING WITH LAST-MINUTE SCHEDULE CHANGES

Life is unpredictable, and last-minute changes are inevitable in co-parenting. Having a plan for handling these situations ensures that both parents remain flexible and avoid unnecessary conflict.

1. COMMUNICATE CHANGES AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE

- **Notify the Co-Parent Immediately:** If you need to make a change to the schedule, inform the other parent as soon as possible. This allows them time to adjust their own plans.
- **Explain the Reason Clearly:** Be clear about why the schedule change is necessary. Whether it’s due to work, illness, or an unexpected event, transparency helps build trust.

2. BE UNDERSTANDING AND FLEXIBLE

- **Be Open to Requests:** When your co-parent requests a change, be understanding and willing to accommodate when possible. Flexibility is key to maintaining a positive co-parenting relationship.

- **Agree on Make-Up Time:** If one parent needs to miss scheduled time with the child due to a last-minute change, discuss how to make up that time. This could mean adjusting the schedule later in the week or extending weekend time.

3. ESTABLISH GUIDELINES FOR EMERGENCIES

- **Create a Last-Minute Policy:** Decide in advance how you will handle emergencies or last-minute requests. For instance, agree that non-urgent changes should be requested at least 24 hours in advance, while urgent changes (e.g., due to sickness or work emergencies) can be handled with more flexibility.
- **Have a Backup Plan:** Identify who will handle the child in case both parents are unable to care for them at a specific time due to emergencies (e.g., a grandparent or trusted family member).

4. KEEP THE CHILD INFORMED

- **Communicate Changes to the Child Appropriately:** When there is a schedule change, explain it to the child in an age-appropriate way. Let them know why the change is happening and when they will see the other parent again, to prevent confusion or anxiety.

5. USE TECHNOLOGY FOR QUICK UPDATES

- **Create a shared Google calendar:** a shared calendar that contains all important dates and events in the broader family lives, as well as dates for school events, doctor visits, appointments and custody visits.
- **Confirm Changes in Writing:** Even if changes are discussed over the phone, it's helpful to follow up with a written confirmation (e.g., via text or email) to avoid confusion later.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Managing child-related expenses, handling unexpected costs, and establishing child support agreements are crucial elements of effective co-parenting. By creating a clear financial plan, fostering open communication, and remaining flexible, both parents can ensure that the child's needs are met while maintaining a healthy co-parenting relationship. Clarity and fairness in financial responsibilities not only support the child's well-being but also contribute to a harmonious co-parenting dynamic. Regularly revisiting these agreements and strategies allows for adaptability as circumstances change, ensuring that both parents remain aligned in their commitment to supporting their child.

MANAGING CHILD-RELATED EXPENSES

Managing expenses related to your child is an essential part of co-parenting. Having a clear plan helps avoid conflicts and ensures that both parents contribute fairly to the child's well-being. Proper financial planning also provides the child with stability and security.

1. IDENTIFY REGULAR CHILD-RELATED EXPENSES

- **Basic Needs:** These include everyday expenses such as food, clothing, shelter, and transportation.
- **Education:** This includes school tuition, supplies, extracurricular activities, and tutoring. Don't forget field trips, school uniforms, or special classes.

- **Healthcare:** This includes medical insurance premiums, routine doctor visits, dental care, prescription medications, and emergency medical treatments.
- **Childcare:** Consider daycare, after-school programs, and babysitters if both parents are working.
- **Recreation and Social Activities:** Sports, hobbies, lessons (e.g., music or dance), and social events should be accounted for in your financial plan.

2. CREATE A SHARED EXPENSE SYSTEM

- **Set Up a Budget:** Co-parents should agree on a monthly or annual budget for child-related expenses. This includes estimating costs for school supplies, clothing, healthcare, and activities.
- **Split Costs Fairly:** Determine how to divide the costs. Some parents opt to split costs 50/50, while others divide expenses based on their incomes. For example, if one parent earns significantly more, they might cover a higher percentage of certain costs. Keep this transparent and fair to avoid future disputes.
- **Track Expenses:** Use shared financial tools that allow tracking of child-related expenses. This ensures both parents stay informed and can track their contributions.

3. CLARIFY WHO PAYS FOR WHAT

- **Assign Responsibility:** Decide who will pay for specific costs. For example, one parent might cover school supplies, while the other handles medical expenses. Clear division of responsibilities prevents confusion and arguments.
- **Use a Reimbursement System:** If one parent covers a larger expense (e.g., tuition, a medical bill), there should be a clear agreement on how the other parent will reimburse their share. This can be done on a monthly or quarterly basis to simplify payment logistics.

STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING UNEXPECTED COSTS

Unplanned expenses are inevitable in co-parenting. Whether it's a medical emergency, an unexpected school fee, or a last-minute extracurricular event, both parents need to have strategies in place for handling such situations calmly and efficiently.

1. CREATE AN EMERGENCY FUND

- **JOINT EMERGENCY FUND:** Consider setting up a joint savings account dedicated to unexpected child-related costs. Both parents can contribute regularly (e.g., monthly) to build a buffer for emergencies like medical bills, urgent travel, or unforeseen school expenses.
- **INDIVIDUAL EMERGENCY FUNDS:** Alternatively, each parent can maintain their own emergency fund. When unexpected expenses arise, both parents can draw from these accounts to handle costs equitably.

2. PLAN FOR MEDICAL EMERGENCIES

- **MEDICAL INSURANCE:** Ensure the child is covered by appropriate medical insurance. Determine who will pay for insurance premiums and how out-of-pocket costs will be divided. Some parents may decide to split medical costs equally, while others may divide them based on income or other factors.
- **PREPARE FOR UNINSURED COSTS:** Not all medical expenses may be covered by insurance (e.g., braces, therapy). Have an agreement in place on how to manage these costs when they arise, such as splitting the costs based on a pre-determined percentage or income.

3. SET UP GUIDELINES FOR UNEXPECTED SCHOOL AND ACTIVITY COSTS

- **COMMUNICATE EARLY:** When unexpected school or activity costs arise (e.g., a class trip or sports registration fee), inform the other parent as soon as possible. Open communication is key to managing unexpected expenses and minimizing conflict.
- **DISCUSS COVERAGE OPTIONS:** Agree on a plan for how to cover these costs when they arise. For instance, both parents could agree to a predetermined percentage split for any unexpected school fees, or one parent may handle certain types of costs while the other covers others.

4. ESTABLISH CLEAR COMMUNICATION

- **CREATE A SYSTEM FOR NOTIFICATION:** Set up a method for notifying each other about unexpected costs. This could be through a text, email, or a shared co-parenting app where expenses can be logged and discussed.
- **USE A CONSISTENT FORMAT:** When informing the other parent about an unexpected cost, include all necessary details: the nature of the expense, the amount, and any supporting documentation (e.g., bills, receipts). This transparency helps in managing and addressing costs fairly.

5. NEGOTIATE AND COMPROMISE

- **BE WILLING TO NEGOTIATE:** If an unexpected cost arises and one parent is unable to cover their share, be open to negotiation. For example, one parent might agree to pay less this time in exchange for handling more expenses in the future.
- **ESTABLISH A CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS:** Agree on a method to resolve disputes over unexpected expenses. This could involve mediation or discussion with a neutral third party if disagreements arise frequently.

CHILD MAINTENANCE

Source: Department of Justice website (<https://www.justice.gov.za/vg/mnt.html>).

Maintenance is the obligation to provide another person, for example a minor, with housing, food, clothing, education and medical care, or with the means that are necessary for providing the person with these essentials. This legal duty to maintain is called 'the duty to maintain' or 'the duty to support'.

WHO MUST PROVIDE MAINTENANCE?

The duty to maintain is based on blood relationship, adoption, or the fact that the parties are married to each other.

A child must be supported or maintained by:

- his or her parents, whether married, living together, separated or divorced, including parents who have adopted the child; and/or
- his or her grandparents, whether or not the child's parents were married to each other. However, this varies from one case to another.
- The duty to support a family member is not limited to supporting a child. Any family member, irrespective of his or her age, can ask any family member to support or maintain him or her, provided that the following two conditions are met:
 - The family member who claims support is unable to maintain himself or herself.
 - The family member from whom maintenance is claimed is able to afford the maintenance that is claimed.
 - The main requirement of the means test is that the person who is liable to pay maintenance must have MEANS and the maintenance claimed must be REASONABLE.

WHAT EXPENSES MAY BE CLAIMED?

You may claim reasonable support that is necessary for providing the child or other person who has a right to maintenance with a proper living and upbringing. This includes providing necessities such as food, clothing and housing, as well as paying for a proper education.

The court may also order the father to contribute to the payment of laying-in expenses and maintenance from the date of the child's birth up to the date on which the maintenance order is granted.

The court may also grant an order for the payment of medical expenses, or may order that the child be registered on the medical scheme of one of the parties as a dependant. To enable the court to grant a fair maintenance order, both parties must provide the court with proof of their expenses.

Your view of the other parent's behaviour has no effect on your children's right to maintenance. You still have to pay maintenance, even if the other parent:

- remarries
- is involved in another relationship
- does not allow you to see the children or
- if either party later has more children.

Your duty to pay maintenance and your right of access to your children are two entirely separate matters and one has no relation to the other. Furthermore, children of either party do not influence the duty to support. However, the amount of maintenance to be paid may be amended by the court if either of the parties should bring such an application.

STEPS TO FOLLOW TO APPLY FOR MAINTENANCE

- Apply for maintenance at the magistrate's court in the district where you live.
- If you are in doubt, your local court will tell you at which court to apply for maintenance.
- Go to the relevant court and complete and submit [J101, Form A: Application for a maintenance order](#).
- In addition to the completed form, submit proof of your monthly income and expenses, such as receipts for food purchases, electricity and/or rent bill payments.
- The court will set a date on which you and the respondent (the person whom you wish to pay maintenance) must go to the court.
- A maintenance officer and an investigator will investigate your claim and look into your circumstances.
- The court will serve a summons (a letter instructing a person to come to court) on the respondent (the person against whom the claim is brought) to appear in court on a specific date to discuss the matter.
- The respondent then has a choice between agreeing to pay the maintenance as claimed, or contesting the matter in court.
- If the respondent agrees to pay the maintenance as claimed, a magistrate will review the relevant documentation. He or she will then make an order, and may decide to do so without requiring the parties to appear in court.
- If the person who is allegedly liable to pay maintenance does not consent to the issuance of an order, he or she must appear in court, where evidence from both parties and their witnesses will be heard.
- If the court finds the person liable for paying maintenance, it will make an order for the amount of maintenance to be paid. The court will also determine when and how maintenance payments must be made.
- The court can order maintenance money to be paid in one of the following ways:
 - At the local magistrate's office or any other government office designated for this purpose
 - Into the bank or building society account designated by the person concerned
 - Directly to the person who is entitled to the money

- By means of an order that directs the employer of the person who is liable for paying maintenance to deduct the maintenance payment directly from the employee's salary, in accordance with the new Maintenance Act, 1998.

CHANGING THE AMOUNT OF MAINTENANCE

You can request that the amount paid for maintenance be increased or decreased, either because it has become insufficient or because you can no longer afford to pay that amount of maintenance.

Steps to follow

- **If you are the person who receives maintenance:**

- Apply at the magistrate's court that is situated in the district where you as the applicant and the child resides or lives.
- Complete the relevant application form and submit it, together with a statement of income and expenditure, to the maintenance officer.

- **If you are the person who pays maintenance but can no longer afford the amount:**

- Apply for the decrease/ variation order at the magistrate's office where your maintenance order was made.
- Complete the relevant form and submit it to the maintenance officer.
- Submit a complete statement of income and expenditure, as well as a statement explaining the reasons for the application, to the maintenance officer regardless of whether you are the recipient or the payer of the maintenance money. The same process as when a claim for maintenance is first instituted will then be followed.

IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES IN CO-PARENTING

Setting clear boundaries in co-parenting is essential for creating a healthy, functional relationship between parents after separation or divorce. Boundaries help define roles, establish limits, and maintain respect, all of which contribute to minimizing conflict and promoting a positive environment for the child.

Boundaries are a cornerstone of effective co-parenting because they allow both parents to collaborate in a way that protects the child, reduces conflict, and maintains mutual respect. They create structure, promote emotional health, and provide the necessary framework for a successful co-parenting relationship.

1. PROMOTES EMOTIONAL STABILITY

Boundaries allow parents to manage their emotional responses by creating clear guidelines about what is acceptable behaviour. This prevents emotional entanglement or old relationship issues from resurfacing, helping parents focus on their shared goal: the well-being of their child.

2. REDUCES CONFLICT

Well-defined boundaries reduce misunderstandings and miscommunications. When both parents know what is expected of them, they are less likely to cross lines that could lead to arguments or unnecessary conflicts. For example, boundaries around communication (e.g., limiting discussions to child-related matters) prevent discussions from becoming personal and escalating into disputes.

3. PROTECTS THE CHILD

Children benefit from consistency and emotional security, which boundaries help provide. By keeping adult issues separate and ensuring that each parent respects the other's parenting time and authority, boundaries prevent children from being caught in the middle or exposed to parental conflict.

4. ESTABLISHES CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Boundaries clearly define each parent's role in the child's life. This includes responsibilities like who handles specific aspects of the child's care (e.g., medical decisions, schooling) and logistical details such as parenting time or financial contributions. When these roles are well-established, co-parents can work together more smoothly without overstepping or causing confusion.

5. ENCOURAGES HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

When boundaries are in place, communication between co-parents becomes more structured and focused. Clear guidelines around how, when, and what to communicate about can help both parents stay on track, ensuring conversations remain respectful and child-centred.

6. SUPPORTS PERSONAL WELL-BEING

Boundaries protect each parent's individual well-being by ensuring that they have space for their own lives outside of parenting. They help avoid burnout by defining when each parent is "on duty" and when they are not, allowing them to recharge and manage their personal needs.

7. HELPS MANAGE NEW RELATIONSHIPS

As new relationships or step-parents are introduced, boundaries become even more important. They ensure that the new dynamic does not disrupt the existing co-parenting arrangement, allowing space for new partners while preserving the parent-child relationship.

Managing and Maintaining Effective Co-Parenting

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR CO-PARENTING

Clear and respectful communication is crucial for successful co-parenting. By using effective communication strategies, co-parents can minimize misunderstandings, reduce conflict, and ensure the child's needs are consistently prioritized. Here are some essential strategies to promote healthy communication between co-parents:

1. KEEP COMMUNICATION CHILD-CENTRED

The primary focus of all co-parenting conversations should be the child's well-being.

- **Focus on Your Shared Goal:** Always frame discussions around the child's needs, routines, and activities. Avoid bringing up personal issues or past relationship problems. For example, instead of saying, "You're never on time," say, "Our child benefits from consistent routines, so being on time is important for them."
- **Use Neutral Language:** Avoid emotionally charged or accusatory language that can trigger defensiveness. For example, say "Let's talk about how we can improve the schedule" instead of "You always mess up the schedule."

2. CHOOSE THE RIGHT COMMUNICATION METHOD

Using the appropriate method of communication for different situations helps avoid misunderstandings and keeps things organized.

- **Text or Email for Routine Matters:** These methods allow both parents to communicate clearly and document decisions. They also give time to think before responding, reducing the chances of impulsive or emotional reactions.
- **Phone or In-Person for Urgent Issues:** For emergencies or urgent matters, direct communication may be more efficient. Set a respectful tone and stay focused on resolving the issue at hand.
- **Co-Parenting Apps:** Consider using co-parenting apps like OurFamilyWizard or Talking Parents, which help facilitate communication by organizing schedules, sharing information, and keeping a record of all interactions.

3. ESTABLISH CLEAR COMMUNICATION BOUNDARIES

Setting boundaries helps ensure that conversations stay respectful and productive.

- **Agree on When and How to Communicate:** Establish rules for communication, such as agreeing to respond to non-urgent matters within 24 hours or limiting communication to certain times of the day. This prevents late-night emotional texting or unnecessary interruptions.

- **Keep Discussions Brief and to the Point:** Stay focused on the topic at hand and avoid long or emotional tangents. Use bullet points or lists in emails to keep communication organized and clear.

4. PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

Effective communication is not just about talking; it's about listening, too.

- **Listen Without Interrupting:** Let the other parent express their concerns or ideas without jumping in or interrupting. Listening fully can help you better understand their perspective.
- **Reflect and Clarify:** After listening, summarize what you heard to ensure clarity. For example, "So, you're saying you'd like to adjust the drop-off time because of your new work schedule?"
- **Validate Their Concerns:** Acknowledge your co-parent's feelings, even if you disagree. This shows respect and makes them feel heard. For example, say, "I understand that you're frustrated about the schedule changes, and I'll work with you to find a solution."

5. USE "I" STATEMENTS

Using "I" statements instead of "you" statements prevents blame and reduces defensiveness.

- **Express Your Needs Clearly:** Rather than saying "You never listen to me," rephrase it as "I feel frustrated when we don't agree on the schedule." This focuses on your feelings rather than accusing the other parent.
- **Stay Solution-Oriented:** For example, instead of saying, "You always make the decision without me," try, "I'd like us both to have input when we're deciding on our child's extracurricular activities."

6. BE RESPECTFUL AND PROFESSIONAL

Treat the co-parenting relationship as a business partnership focused on the child's well-being.

- **Avoid Personal Criticism:** Keep the conversation about parenting issues and refrain from criticizing your co-parent's personal life or past behaviours.
- **Stay Polite and Courteous:** Even if tensions arise, maintain a respectful tone. Thank the other parent when they help or accommodate changes, and show appreciation for their involvement in the child's life.
- **Use Positive Reinforcement:** Compliment the other parent when they do something well or handle a situation calmly. Positive reinforcement helps create a cooperative environment.

7. STICK TO THE FACTS

Avoid letting emotions dictate the conversation by focusing on factual information.

- **Be Objective:** Focus on logistics, such as the child's schedule, school events, or medical appointments. For example, instead of saying, "You don't care about our child's education," say, "The teacher asked us to sign this homework sheet weekly, so we need to coordinate that."
- **Provide Evidence When Necessary:** If there are important documents, like school reports or medical forms, share them to support the discussion and ensure both parents have access to relevant information.

8. SET REGULAR CHECK-INS

Scheduling regular, structured check-ins can prevent problems from building up over time.

- **Plan Ahead for Regular Updates:** Whether it's weekly, biweekly, or monthly, set a time for a brief conversation or message to update each other on any changes, issues, or upcoming events.
- **Keep Meetings Short and Productive:** Agree on an agenda before check-ins, and stick to it. Avoid rehashing old disagreements, and focus on making decisions for the future.

9. BE FLEXIBLE AND OPEN TO COMPROMISE

Co-parenting often requires compromise and adaptability, especially when circumstances change.

- **Show Willingness to Adjust:** Life can be unpredictable, so being flexible with schedules and decisions helps foster a cooperative relationship. For example, if your co-parent needs to swap weekends due to work commitments, try to accommodate when possible.
- **Look for Win-Win Solutions:** Focus on creating solutions that work for both parents and benefit the child. For example, if a schedule change is necessary, discuss ways to balance time with the child so both parents feel it's fair.

10. USE CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

Conflict is inevitable, but how you handle it makes a big difference in maintaining a positive co-parenting dynamic.

- **Stay Calm During Disagreements:** When conflict arises, take a deep breath and pause before responding. Avoid reacting impulsively or letting anger drive the conversation.

- **Seek Mediation if Needed:** If conflicts cannot be resolved through direct communication, consider involving a neutral third party, such as a mediator, to help guide the discussion and find solutions.

HANDLING CONFLICT BETWEEN CO-PARENTS

Identifying sources of conflict, employing tools for de-escalating arguments, and seeking mediation when necessary are crucial elements of effective co-parenting. By proactively addressing conflicts and maintaining open communication, parents can create a more harmonious co-parenting relationship that prioritizes the well-being of their child. Utilizing these strategies not only reduces tension but also fosters a cooperative environment, ultimately benefiting both parents and children as they navigate the challenges of separation.

IDENTIFYING SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Conflicts in co-parenting often arise from different perspectives on how to raise children, personal issues between parents, or difficulties in communication. Identifying the main sources of conflict is the first step toward managing and resolving them effectively.

1. COMMON SOURCES OF CONFLICT

- **Parenting Styles:** Different approaches to discipline, routines, or general parenting philosophies can lead to disagreements.
- **Scheduling Disputes:** Conflicts about time spent with the child, holidays, or last-minute changes to the schedule can create frustration.
- **Financial Issues:** Disagreements over child-related expenses or differing views on spending can create tension.
- **Communication Breakdowns:** Misunderstandings, lack of clarity, or negative communication patterns often contribute to ongoing conflict.
- **Emotional Residue from the Relationship:** Unresolved emotional issues between parents, such as feelings of resentment, jealousy, or anger, can exacerbate co-parenting conflicts.

2. SELF-REFLECTION

- **Identify Triggers:** Reflect on your personal emotional triggers. Understanding what specific actions or words trigger your frustration can help you approach conflict with more self-awareness.
- **Recognize Patterns:** Look for recurring themes in your conflicts with your co-parent. Are there specific situations that regularly lead to arguments? Identifying these patterns can help address the root cause of disputes.

TOOLS FOR DE-ESCALATING ARGUMENTS

Once conflicts arise, it's essential to have tools and strategies for de-escalating arguments before they negatively impact the co-parenting relationship or the child. Here are some effective techniques:

1. STAY CALM AND COMPOSED

- **Take a Break:** If emotions are running high, take a step back from the situation. A short break can provide time to cool down and regain perspective.
- **Use Grounding Techniques:** Practice grounding techniques such as deep breathing, counting to ten, or visualizing a calm place to help manage your emotional response.

2. PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

- **Listen to Understand:** Focus on what the other parent is saying without preparing your rebuttal. Show that you are genuinely trying to understand their perspective.
- **Paraphrase and Reflect:** Repeat back what you've heard in your own words. This demonstrates that you're paying attention and helps clarify misunderstandings.

3. FOCUS ON THE CHILD'S BEST INTERESTS

- **Keep the Child at the Centre:** Remind both yourself and your co-parent that the primary focus should be the well-being of your child. Frame discussions around what is best for them.
- **Use "I" Statements:** Instead of blaming the other parent, express your feelings and needs using "I" statements. For example, say "I feel worried about the schedule" instead of "You always change the schedule."

4. SET BOUNDARIES

- **Define Boundaries for Conversations:** Establish rules for respectful communication, such as no yelling, name-calling, or interrupting. Agree to pause the conversation if it becomes too heated.
- **Limit Topics:** Agree on specific topics to discuss during co-parenting conversations, avoiding personal grievances that can escalate tensions.

5. SEEK SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

- **Collaborate on Solutions:** Instead of focusing on problems, work together to find practical solutions. Brainstorm ideas and be open to compromise.
- **Stay Solution-Focused:** Keep the conversation directed towards resolving the issue rather than rehashing past grievances.

DEALING WITH A DIFFICULT CO-PARENT

Navigating a co-parenting relationship can be challenging, especially when dealing with a difficult or high-conflict co-parent. This section outlines strategies for managing these situations effectively, protecting both yourself and your child emotionally, and knowing when to seek additional support.

NAVIGATING HIGH-CONFLICT RELATIONSHIPS

High-conflict co-parenting situations can create a stressful environment for both parents and children. Here are some strategies to navigate these relationships effectively:

1. Establish Clear Boundaries

- **Define Communication Rules:** Set boundaries around how and when you communicate with your co-parent. For instance, decide whether to use text or email for communication, as these formats can reduce emotional escalation compared to face-to-face or phone conversations.
- **Limit Discussions:** Focus discussions strictly on parenting issues, avoiding personal topics that can lead to conflict.

2. Stay Calm and Composed

- **Manage Your Reactions:** Keep your emotions in check during interactions. If your co-parent becomes hostile or aggressive, practice deep breathing or take a break from the conversation to regain composure.
- **Practice Assertive Communication:** Use clear and respectful language when expressing your thoughts. Avoid passive or aggressive communication styles that can escalate conflict.

3. Document Everything

- **Keep Records:** Document all communications with your co-parent, including emails, text messages, and notes from phone conversations. This can be helpful if conflicts escalate or if you need to seek legal advice in the future.
- **Note Significant Events:** Keep a log of important events, such as missed visitation or financial discussions, to track patterns that may need addressing later.

4. Use "I" Statements

- **Express Your Needs Clearly:** Frame your concerns and needs using "I" statements to reduce defensiveness. For example, say "I feel overwhelmed when plans change at the last minute" instead of "You always change plans without telling me."

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILD EMOTIONALLY

Protecting your emotional well-being and that of your child is essential in a high-conflict co-parenting situation. Here are some ways to ensure emotional safety:

1. PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE

- **Focus on Your Well-Being:** Engage in self-care activities that promote your mental and physical health, such as exercise, hobbies, or spending time with supportive friends and family.
- **Seek Support:** Talk to friends, family, or a therapist about your experiences. Having a support system can provide you with a safe space to vent and gain perspective.

2. SHIELD YOUR CHILD FROM CONFLICT

- **Avoid Involving Your Child:** Do not share adult problems or conflicts with your child. Keep discussions about co-parenting matters between you and your co-parent to avoid placing the child in the middle.
- **Encourage Open Communication:** Foster an environment where your child feels safe expressing their feelings. Let them know they can talk to you about any concerns they have without fear of causing conflict.

3. MODEL HEALTHY BEHAVIOUR

- **Demonstrate Calmness:** Model calm and respectful behaviour in front of your child, even when dealing with a difficult co-parent. This helps teach your child how to handle conflicts maturely.
- **Promote Emotional Expression:** Encourage your child to express their feelings in a healthy way. Teach them coping strategies, such as journaling or talking about their emotions.

4. SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

- **Accept Limitations:** Recognize that you cannot change your co-parent's behaviour but can control your reactions and responses. Setting realistic expectations can reduce frustration and anxiety.

WHEN TO INVOLVE A THIRD PARTY OR LEGAL SUPPORT

In some situations, it may be necessary to involve a third party or seek legal support to protect yourself and your child. Here are indicators for when to take this step:

1. PERSISTENT CONFLICT

- **Ongoing Hostility:** If disagreements become a pattern and escalate into persistent hostility, it may be time to seek professional mediation to facilitate communication and resolve issues.
- **Lack of Cooperation:** If your co-parent consistently refuses to collaborate or communicate effectively regarding parenting responsibilities, mediation can provide a structured environment for discussion.

2. SAFETY CONCERNS

- **Threats or Abuse:** If there are any threats of physical harm, emotional abuse, or substance abuse concerns, it is crucial to seek legal advice or contact authorities immediately to protect yourself and your child.
- **Substance Abuse Issues:** If your co-parent has a history of substance abuse that impacts their ability to care for the child, legal intervention may be necessary to ensure safety.

3. LEGAL DOCUMENTATION

- **Need for Modifications:** If you need to modify custody arrangements, visitation schedules, or child support due to changes in circumstances, legal support can help ensure these changes are documented and enforceable.
- **Enforcing Agreements:** If your co-parent is not adhering to previously agreed-upon arrangements (e.g., custody or child support), legal assistance may be required to enforce those agreements.

SEEKING MEDIATION WHEN NECESSARY

If conflicts become too challenging to manage independently, seeking mediation can be an effective way to resolve disputes and enhance communication.

1. UNDERSTAND MEDIATION

- **Definition of Mediation:** Mediation involves a neutral third party who helps parents communicate effectively and find mutually agreeable solutions. The mediator does not take sides but facilitates the discussion.
- **Benefits of Mediation:** Mediation can lead to better communication, reduced conflict, and tailored solutions that meet the specific needs of both parents and the child.

2. WHEN TO SEEK MEDIATION

- **Persistent Conflicts:** If disagreements are frequent and unresolved, mediation can provide a structured environment for discussion.
- **Communication Breakdown:** If you find it difficult to communicate with your co-parent without conflict, a mediator can facilitate more productive conversations.
- **Significant Changes:** Consider mediation during major life transitions, such as changes in custody arrangements or financial responsibilities.

3. HOW TO FIND A MEDIATOR

- **Research Qualified Mediators:** Look for mediators who specialize in family or co-parenting issues. They should have appropriate credentials and experience.
- **Ask for Recommendations:** Seek recommendations from trusted friends, family, or legal professionals who have experience with co-parenting mediation.

4. PREPARE FOR MEDIATION SESSIONS

- **Identify Goals:** Before the session, clarify what you hope to achieve through mediation. Outline key points and concerns you want to address.
- **Stay Open-Minded:** Approach mediation with a willingness to compromise and collaborate. Being open to different perspectives can facilitate better outcomes.

• FOLLOW UP AFTER MEDIATION

- **Create a Co-Parenting Agreement:** After mediation, document any agreements made during the session. This helps provide clarity and accountability moving forward.
- **Continue Communication:** Maintain open lines of communication after mediation. Check-in regularly to ensure that both parents are adhering to the agreements and address any new concerns that arise.

The South African Association of Mediators

<https://www.saam.org.za>

<https://www.saam.org.za/find-a-mediator>

HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICTS CALMLY IN CO-PARENTING

Even with the best intentions, disagreements will happen. Knowing how to handle these conflicts calmly is essential for maintaining a healthy co-parenting relationship.

1. STAY CALM AND REGULATE YOUR EMOTIONS

- **Pause Before Responding:** Take a few moments to breathe before reacting, especially when something triggers strong emotions. This will prevent you from saying something you might regret.
- **Keep Your Voice Neutral:** Even when you feel frustrated, keep your tone calm. Raising your voice or using a harsh tone can escalate the conflict.

2. FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS, NOT PROBLEMS

- **Identify the Issue Clearly:** Make sure both parents are on the same page about what the conflict is. Avoid side issues or unrelated past grievances.
- **Work Toward Compromise:** Focus on finding a middle ground. Ask yourself and your co-parent what solutions might work for both parties and the child.
- **Ask for Help if Needed:** If the conflict is too difficult to resolve alone, consider bringing in a neutral third party, such as a mediator or family counsellor, to help find a resolution.

3. DON'T INVOLVE THE CHILD IN DISPUTES

- **Protect the Child from Tension:** Never argue in front of your child or use them as a messenger between parents. Children should never feel they have to choose sides.
- **Keep Conversations Private:** Discuss conflicts out of earshot from the child, and ensure that they are not exposed to the stress of adult problems.

2. TIME OUT FOR EMOTIONS

- Take a Break from the Discussion: If emotions run high, agree to step away for a set amount of time (e.g., "Let's revisit this in 24 hours"). This allows both parents to cool down and think more rationally.

AVOIDING EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS DURING CO-PARENTING COMMUNICATION

Certain emotional triggers can derail co-parenting discussions, causing communication to become unproductive or heated. Being aware of these triggers and learning how to manage them is crucial.

1. IDENTIFY YOUR EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS

- Know What Sets You Off: Reflect on which topics or behaviours from your co-parent trigger strong emotional reactions (e.g., feeling disrespected, criticized, or ignored).
- Understand the Source: Many emotional triggers stem from past relationship issues. Recognizing that your reaction may be rooted in past experiences rather than the present situation can help you approach the issue more calmly.

2. DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

- Separate Emotions from Co-Parenting: Remind yourself that the co-parenting relationship is about your child, not about settling old personal disputes. Keep your focus on parenting matters and try not to let emotions from the previous romantic relationship influence your reactions.
- Assume Positive Intent: Instead of jumping to conclusions, assume that your co-parent's actions or words come from a place of concern for the child, not a desire to upset you.

3. USE GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

- Breathe and Refocus: When you feel yourself getting triggered, use deep breathing exercises to calm down. Ground yourself by focusing on your child's well-being rather than your emotions.
- Take a Step Back: If a specific topic is too triggering to handle in the moment, acknowledge it and suggest discussing it later when you feel more composed.

4. AVOID KNEE-JERK RESPONSES

- Give Yourself Time: If you receive a message or comment that feels emotionally triggering, don't respond immediately. Take time to process the information and compose a calm, thoughtful reply.
- Draft and Revise Responses: For difficult discussions, consider drafting a response and then reviewing it later. This allows you to edit out any reactive or emotional language.

Helping Children Adjust to Co-Parenting

Transitions can be challenging for children, especially in a co-parenting situation where they may need to adapt to new routines, living arrangements, or family dynamics. Providing support during these times is essential for helping children navigate changes smoothly and maintain emotional stability.

Addressing negative behaviours stemming from separation, managing feelings of guilt in children, and avoiding putting the child in the middle are vital components of successful

co-parenting. By fostering open communication, providing reassurance, and maintaining clear boundaries, parents can help their children navigate the emotional challenges of separation. Supporting children in expressing their feelings and reinforcing positive relationships with both parents not only contributes to their emotional well-being but also strengthens the co-parenting relationship. Ultimately, creating a nurturing and supportive environment helps children thrive amidst changes and uncertainties.

1. PREPARE IN ADVANCE FOR TRANSITIONS

- **Discuss Upcoming Changes:** Talk to your child about the upcoming transition well in advance. This could include changes such as moving to a new home, starting a new school, or adjusting to new family dynamics. Explain what will happen and why, using language appropriate for their age.
- **Use Visual Aids:** For younger children, visual aids such as charts or calendars can help them understand the timeline of the transition. Mark important dates and provide a visual representation of what to expect.

2. CREATE STABILITY AND ROUTINE

- **Establish Consistent Routines:** Consistency is key in helping children feel secure during transitions. Try to maintain regular routines around meals, bedtimes, and daily activities, even amidst changes.
- **Reinforce Familiarity:** Maintain some familiar elements in the child's life. This could be their favourite toys, bedtime stories, or routines that remind them of their previous environment, providing comfort during the adjustment period.

3. ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION

- **Foster a Safe Space for Discussion:** Create an environment where children feel safe to express their feelings and concerns. Encourage them to share their thoughts about the transition, whether they are excited, nervous, or confused.
- **Validate Their Feelings:** Acknowledge and validate the child's feelings. Let them know that it's normal to feel a mix of emotions during transitions and that you are there to support them.

4. BE PATIENT AND UNDERSTANDING

- **Give Them Time to Adjust:** Understand that transitions can take time. Some children may adapt quickly, while others may need more time to feel comfortable. Be patient and provide reassurance throughout the adjustment period.
- **Check-in Regularly:** Frequently check in with your child to see how they are feeling about the changes. This shows that you care and are there to support them through the transition.

5. SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP IF NEEDED

- **Consider Counselling:** If your child is struggling significantly with the transition, consider seeking help from a child psychologist or counsellor. They can provide additional support and strategies to help your child cope.

HELPING CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR EMOTIONS

Supporting children during transitions and helping them express their emotions are crucial components of effective co-parenting. By preparing for changes, maintaining stability, encouraging open communication, and teaching emotional literacy, parents can provide a nurturing environment that fosters resilience and emotional well-being. These efforts not only help children navigate the challenges of co-parenting but also contribute to their overall development and happiness. Ultimately, a supportive co-parenting approach strengthens the parent-child relationship and equips children with the skills they need to express their emotions throughout their lives.

1. TEACH EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

- **Introduce Emotion Words:** Help your child expand their emotional vocabulary by teaching them words to describe different feelings, such as happy, sad, frustrated, excited, and scared. You can use books, charts, or flashcards to make it fun and engaging.
- **Model Emotional Expression:** Demonstrate healthy emotional expression in your interactions. Share your feelings openly and show how to express them in constructive ways. For instance, if you're feeling stressed, talk about it and explain how you plan to cope.

2. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPRESSION

- **Use Art and Play:** Encourage children to express their feelings through creative outlets like drawing, painting, or playing with toys. These activities can serve as a medium for children to communicate emotions they might struggle to express verbally.
- **Storytelling and Role Play:** Utilize storytelling or role-playing to help children articulate their emotions. Create scenarios together where characters face various challenges, prompting discussions about how those characters might feel and respond.

3. ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE ABOUT FEELINGS

- **Ask Open-Ended Questions:** Engage your child in discussions about their feelings by asking open-ended questions such as, "How did that make you feel?" or "What do you think about this situation?" This encourages them to share their thoughts and emotions more deeply.
- **Active Listening:** Practice active listening by giving your child your full attention when they speak. Show empathy and understanding, and avoid interrupting or dismissing their feelings. This reinforces their sense of being heard and valued.

4. NORMALIZE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

- **Validate Their Feelings:** Let your child know that it's okay to feel a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, or frustration. Normalizing these feelings helps reduce stigma and encourages children to express themselves openly.

- **Share Your Own Emotions:** Share your feelings with your child in an age-appropriate way, demonstrating that everyone experiences emotions and that expressing them is healthy and normal.

6. PROVIDE SUPPORTIVE TOOLS

- **Emotion Charts:** Create an emotion chart where your child can point to or select the feelings they are experiencing. This visual aid can help them communicate their emotions more easily.
- **Journaling:** Encourage older children to keep a journal where they can write about their feelings and experiences. Journaling can be a therapeutic way for children to process their emotions privately.

DEALING WITH CHILD'S RESISTANCE OR LOYALTY CONFLICTS

Children may exhibit negative behaviours in response to the stress and changes that come with parental separation. Understanding and addressing these behaviours is essential to help children navigate their emotions and maintain healthy relationships with both parents.

1. Identify The Underlying Causes Of Negative Behaviours

- **Acknowledge the Impact of Separation:** Recognize that negative behaviours may stem from feelings of sadness, anger, or confusion regarding the separation. Children may not fully understand the situation and may express their emotions through acting out.
- **Look for Triggers:** Pay attention to specific situations or events that seem to trigger negative behaviours, such as changes in routine, interactions with peers, or reminders of the separation. Identifying these triggers can help parents address the underlying issues.

2. Maintain Open Communication

- **Encourage Expression of Feelings:** Provide a safe environment for children to express their feelings. Ask open-ended questions about how they are feeling regarding the separation and validate their emotions.
- **Discuss Negative Behaviours Calmly:** When negative behaviours occur, address them calmly and constructively. Discuss why the behaviour is problematic and explore the feelings behind it, helping the child connect their emotions to their actions.

3. Set Clear Boundaries And Expectations

- **Establish Consistent Rules:** Set clear rules and consequences regarding behaviour in both households. Consistency helps children understand expectations and reduces confusion.
- **Encourage Positive Behaviours:** Reinforce positive behaviours with praise and rewards. Acknowledge when your child handles their feelings appropriately, encouraging them to express themselves in healthier ways.

4. Implement Coping Strategies

- **Teach Coping Mechanisms:** Help your child develop coping strategies for managing their emotions, such as deep breathing, journaling, or using art to express feelings. These tools can provide them with constructive outlets for their feelings.
- **Model Healthy Coping:** Demonstrate healthy coping mechanisms in your own behaviour. Show your child how you handle stress or frustration, encouraging them to emulate positive coping strategies.

5. Seek Professional Help If Necessary

- **Consider Counselling:** If negative behaviours persist or escalate, consider seeking professional help. A child psychologist or counsellor can provide support and strategies tailored to your child's specific needs and emotional challenges.

MANAGING FEELINGS OF GUILT IN CHILDREN

Children often feel guilt during and after parental separation, believing they might be responsible for the changes in their family dynamic. It is crucial to address these feelings to help them understand that the separation is not their fault.

1. Normalize Feelings of Guilt

- **Acknowledge Their Feelings:** Validate your child's feelings of guilt by acknowledging them. Let them know that it's common to feel this way during such significant changes and that it's okay to talk about those feelings.
- **Discuss the Nature of Guilt:** Help your child understand what guilt is and why they might be feeling it. Explain that guilt often arises when we care about others and that it does not mean they are at fault.

2. Reassure Your Child

- **Affirm Their Role:** Reassure your child that they are not responsible for the separation. Use simple language to explain that adults sometimes make choices that are not related to the child's behaviour.
- **Provide Reassurance of Love:** Regularly affirm your love and support for your child. Remind them that both parents love them and that the separation does not change that love.

3. Encourage Open Communication

- **Facilitate Conversations:** Encourage your child to talk about their feelings of guilt. Ask them what specifically makes them feel guilty, and explore those feelings together.
- **Listen Without Judgment:** Create a safe space for your child to share their emotions without fear of judgment or reprimand. This openness can help alleviate feelings of guilt.

4. Help Them Focus on Positive Outcomes

- **Reframe the Situation:** Help your child see the positive aspects of the situation, such as spending time with each parent separately and building stronger relationships. Encourage them to focus on the benefits of having two loving homes.

6. Seek Support if Needed

- **Engage Professionals:** If feelings of guilt become overwhelming or persist, consider seeking support from a child psychologist or counsellor who can provide strategies for managing these emotions.

AVOIDING PUTTING THE CHILD IN THE MIDDLE

One of the most challenging aspects of co-parenting is avoiding the situation where a child feels caught in the middle of parental conflict. Protecting the child from parental disputes is essential for their emotional well-being.

1. ESTABLISH CLEAR BOUNDARIES

- **MAINTAIN SEPARATION OF ISSUES:** Avoid discussing adult issues, disagreements, or conflicts in front of your child. Clearly separate parenting issues from personal disputes.
- **SET BOUNDARIES ON COMMUNICATION:** When communicating with your co-parent, keep discussions focused on co-parenting matters and avoid discussing personal grievances that may involve the child.

2. ENCOURAGE RESPECTFUL INTERACTIONS

- **MODEL POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR:** Demonstrate respectful communication and conflict resolution in front of your child. Showing kindness and respect toward the other parent reinforces to the child that it's okay to love both parents.
- **ADDRESS DIFFERENCES PRIVATELY:** If disagreements arise, discuss them privately without the child present. This approach helps shield the child from parental conflict and stress.

3. REINFORCE LOYALTY AND LOVE

- **ENCOURAGE RELATIONSHIPS WITH BOTH PARENTS:** Remind your child that it's okay to love both parents and have relationships with each. Avoid making them feel guilty for spending time with the other parent.
- **AVOID NEGATIVE TALK:** Refrain from speaking negatively about the other parent in front of the child. This can create loyalty conflicts and put the child in an uncomfortable position.

4. CREATE A UNIFIED FRONT

- **COLLABORATE ON DECISIONS:** When possible, make joint decisions regarding parenting strategies and approaches. Presenting a united front helps to reduce confusion and reinforces the message that both parents are committed to the child's well-being.

- **CO-PARENTING MEETINGS:** Consider regular co-parenting meetings to discuss schedules, behavioural strategies, and any concerns. This can help both parents stay aligned and focused on the child's needs.

5. FOSTER OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH THE CHILD

- **ENCOURAGE THEM TO SPEAK UP:** Create an environment where your child feels comfortable expressing their feelings and opinions. Let them know they can talk to either parent if they feel overwhelmed.
- **LISTEN AND VALIDATE:** When your child shares their feelings, listen actively and validate their emotions. This shows that you respect their experience and encourages them to communicate openly.

INTEGRATING NEW RELATIONSHIPS OR STEP-PARENTS

Integrating new relationships or step-parents into a co-parenting dynamic can be challenging but is essential for creating a supportive family environment. Here are some strategies for successfully managing this transition:

1. COMMUNICATION IS KEY

- **DISCUSS CHANGES OPENLY:** Communicate with your child about new relationships in a straightforward and age-appropriate manner. Encourage them to express their feelings and concerns.
- **INVOLVE THE OTHER PARENT:** Whenever possible, discuss the new relationship with your co-parent. Keeping them informed can help reduce potential conflict and promote a united front.

2. INTRODUCE GRADUALLY

- **TAKE YOUR TIME:** Introduce the new partner or step-parent slowly, allowing the child to adjust to the idea before meeting in person. Consider discussing expectations and boundaries with your new partner.
- **PLAN LOW-PRESSURE MEETINGS:** Arrange casual, low-pressure outings to facilitate a natural introduction. Family activities can help ease tension and make everyone more comfortable.

3. FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS

- **ENCOURAGE BONDING:** Allow time for your child to bond with the new partner or step-parent. Provide opportunities for them to spend quality time together without pressure.
- **SUPPORT POSITIVE INTERACTIONS:** Encourage positive interactions and reinforce the new relationship by highlighting the benefits of having additional supportive figures in their life.

4. RESPECT BOUNDARIES

- **DEFINE ROLES CLEARLY:** Establish clear roles and expectations for the new partner or step-parent, ensuring everyone understands their place in the family dynamic. This helps prevent misunderstandings and fosters cooperation.
- **SET LIMITS ON INVOLVEMENT:** Recognize that the new partner may have different parenting styles or boundaries. Discuss and agree on how involved they will be in parenting decisions.

6. MONITOR EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- **CHECK IN WITH YOUR CHILD:** Regularly ask your child how they feel about the new relationship. Provide them with a safe space to express their emotions, and validate their feelings.
- **BE ATTENTIVE TO CHANGES:** Watch for any signs of distress or behavioural changes in your child. Address any concerns promptly and provide reassurance.

HANDLING RELOCATIONS OR SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS

Relocations or significant life events can introduce stress and uncertainty into co-parenting situations. Here's how to manage these transitions effectively:

1. COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN

- **Discuss Potential Moves:** If relocation is on the horizon, discuss it with your co-parent and child as early as possible. Transparency helps prepare everyone for the change.
- **Involve Your Child:** Encourage your child to share their thoughts and feelings about the potential move. Acknowledging their concerns is essential to helping them cope.

2. CREATE A TRANSITION PLAN

- **Outline Logistics:** Work together to create a detailed transition plan that addresses logistical issues, such as living arrangements, visitation schedules, and transportation.
- **Set Up New Routines:** Establish new routines for your child in their new environment, including schools, activities, and friendships. Familiarity can help ease the transition.

3. BE MINDFUL OF EMOTIONAL IMPACT

- **Recognize Emotional Responses:** Understand that relocation can evoke various emotions in children, including sadness, anxiety, and excitement. Be patient and supportive as they navigate these feelings.
- **Encourage Expression:** Provide outlets for your child to express their emotions, whether through art, writing, or conversation. This can help them process their feelings more effectively.

4. MAINTAIN STABILITY

- **Stick to Existing Agreements:** Try to maintain existing parenting arrangements and agreements as much as possible to provide a sense of stability during the transition.
- **Focus on Consistency:** Consistency in routines and communication is vital. Reassure your child that both parents will continue to be there for them despite the changes.

5. INVOLVE THIRD PARTIES WHEN NECESSARY

- **Seek Professional Guidance:** If the transition proves particularly challenging, consider involving a family therapist or counsellor who specializes in relocation issues.
- **Utilize Mediation Services:** If there are disputes regarding the relocation, mediation can help facilitate discussions and reach agreements that work for both parents.

ADAPTING TO CHANGES IN YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS AS THEY GROW

As children grow, their needs evolve, requiring parents to adapt their co-parenting strategies accordingly. Here's how to effectively address these changes:

1. STAY INFORMED ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

- **Educate Yourself:** Familiarize yourself with the developmental stages of your child to understand their evolving needs. This knowledge can help you anticipate challenges and adapt your parenting approach.
- **Seek Resources:** Utilize books, articles, and parenting resources that provide insights into child development. Consider joining parenting groups or forums for support and advice.

2. MAINTAIN OPEN COMMUNICATION

- **Encourage Regular Check-Ins:** Create a routine for check-ins with your child to discuss their feelings, interests, and any changes they may be experiencing. This fosters open communication and strengthens your relationship.
- **Listen Actively:** Be an active listener during conversations with your child. Validate their feelings and provide reassurance as they navigate new experiences and challenges.

3. ADJUST PARENTING STRATEGIES

- **Adapt Discipline Techniques:** As children grow, they may require different discipline methods. Tailor your approach based on their age, personality, and emotional needs.
- **Provide Autonomy:** Encourage independence by allowing your child to make age-appropriate choices. This helps them build confidence and develop decision-making skills.

4. COLLABORATE WITH YOUR CO-PARENT

- **Align Approaches:** Work together with your co-parent to ensure consistency in parenting strategies and expectations. This unified approach helps your child feel secure and supported.
- **Discuss Changing Needs:** Regularly discuss any changes in your child's needs or behaviour with your co-parent to adjust parenting strategies accordingly.

5. BE PREPARED FOR TRANSITION CHALLENGES

- **Acknowledge Challenges:** Recognize that adapting to your child's changing needs can be challenging. Be patient with yourself and your child as you navigate these transitions.
- **Consider Professional Support:** If your child struggles with significant changes or developmental challenges, consider seeking professional help from a therapist or counsellor specializing in child development.

PRACTICAL TIPS TO BUILD A BLENDED FAMILY

Blending families can be a rewarding yet complex process, as it involves integrating different family dynamics, traditions, and personalities. Here are some practical tips to help ensure a smoother transition and create a harmonious blended family:

1. Communicate Openly and Honestly

- **Encourage Dialogue:** Create an open environment where all family members feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. Regular family meetings can facilitate communication.
- **Set Expectations:** Discuss what each member expects from the new family structure, including roles and responsibilities.

2. Take Your Time

- **Allow for Adjustment:** Understand that blending families takes time. Be patient with each other and allow relationships to develop naturally.
- **Avoid Rushing:** Don't force interactions between step-siblings or between children and new partners. Let connections grow at their own pace.

3. Establish Clear Roles and Boundaries

- **Define Parenting Roles:** Clearly outline each parent's role in the new family structure. Discuss how parenting responsibilities will be divided to avoid confusion and conflict.
- **Set Boundaries:** Establish boundaries for children regarding the involvement of step-parents. Ensure that children understand and respect these boundaries.

4. Create Family Traditions

- **Start New Traditions:** Develop new family rituals or traditions that include everyone. This can help foster a sense of belonging and unity among family members.
- **Incorporate Old Traditions:** Integrate traditions from each family to create a sense of continuity and respect for everyone's backgrounds.

6. Encourage Bonding Activities

- **Plan Family Outings:** Organize activities that allow family members to interact in a fun and relaxed setting. This could include outings, game nights, or cooking together.
- **Engage in Shared Hobbies:** Identify common interests among family members and engage in shared hobbies or activities to strengthen relationships.

7. Foster Individual Relationships

- **Spend One-on-One Time:** Encourage individual bonding between step-siblings and parents. This helps to build trust and deepen relationships.
- **Respect Individuality:** Acknowledge and support each child's unique personality and needs, allowing them to feel valued as individuals.

8. Be Supportive of Your Children's Feelings

- **Acknowledge Emotions:** Recognize that children may experience a range of emotions, including sadness, jealousy, or confusion. Validate their feelings and provide reassurance.

- Encourage Open Expression: Create a safe space for children to express their emotions and concerns about the blending process.

9. Address Conflict Constructively

- Set Conflict Resolution Strategies: Establish guidelines for how to handle disagreements. Encourage family members to communicate openly and respectfully.
- Avoid Favouritism: Treat all children equally and fairly. Avoid showing favouritism, as this can lead to resentment and conflict.

10. Be Mindful of Parenting Styles

- Align Approaches: Discuss parenting philosophies and try to align your approaches. Consistency in discipline and expectations can help create a more stable environment.
- Respect Each Other's Authority: Recognize and respect each other's authority as parents. Support each other's decisions in front of the children.

11. Seek Professional Help if Needed

- Consider Family Counselling: If blending families becomes particularly challenging, consider seeking the assistance of a family therapist or counsellor who specializes in blended families.
- Workshops and Support Groups: Participate in workshops or support groups focused on blending families to gain insights and share experiences with others.

12. Practice Flexibility and Adaptability

- Be Open to Change: Understand that blending families may require flexibility in routines and expectations. Adapt as needed to accommodate everyone's needs.
- Stay Positive: Maintain a positive outlook and be willing to adjust strategies as the family dynamics evolve over time.

A CHILD'S GUIDE TO CO-PARENTING

1. What is Co-Parenting?

Co-parenting means that both of your parents are working together to take care of you, even though they are not living together anymore. This is about making sure you feel loved and supported by both of them.

2. Why Are My Parents Living Apart?

Sometimes, parents decide that it's best for them to live in different homes. This doesn't change how much they love you. They want to make sure you are happy and healthy, and co-parenting is one way to do that.

3. Your Feelings Matter

It's normal to have a lot of different feelings during this time. You might feel sad, confused, or even angry. It's important to remember that your feelings are valid. Talk about them with someone you trust, like a parent, teacher, or close friend.

4. Understanding Your New Routine

Co-parenting means you might have a new schedule. You may spend some days with one parent and other days with the other. Having a routine helps you know what to expect. If you're unsure about your schedule, ask your parents or look at a calendar together.

5. Visiting Mom and Dad

When you visit each parent, it's an opportunity to spend quality time with them. You might have different activities at each house, which can be exciting! Remember, both parents want to have fun with you and make you feel special.

6. Communicating with Your Parents

It's important to share your thoughts and feelings with both parents. You can:

- **Use Your Words:** If something is bothering you, let them know.
- **Ask Questions:** If you're confused about something, don't hesitate to ask.
- **Express Your Needs:** If you need something, tell your parents how they can help.

7. Getting Through Tough Times

Sometimes, things might feel tough, and that's okay. Here are some tips to help you cope:

- **Talk About It:** Share how you feel with someone you trust.
- **Keep a Journal:** Writing can help you express your feelings.
- **Take Deep Breaths:** When you're feeling overwhelmed, take a moment to breathe deeply and relax.

8. Having Fun with Both Parents

Try to find ways to enjoy time with both parents. You could:

- **Plan Activities Together:** Whether it's playing games, going to the park, or watching a movie, find fun things to do together.
- **Celebrate Special Days:** Remember that both parents want to celebrate your birthdays and holidays, so make sure to plan fun activities together.

9. What to Do If You're Feeling Upset

If you're feeling sad or upset, try these strategies:

- **Talk to Someone:** Speak to a trusted adult about how you feel.
- **Draw or Create:** Art can help express your emotions when words are hard to find.
- **Stay Active:** Going outside to play or ride your bike can help lift your spirits.

10. Helpful Tips for Co-Parenting Success

- **Be Respectful:** Treat both parents with kindness and respect. It helps create a positive environment for everyone.
- **Be Flexible:** Sometimes plans change, and that's okay. Try to be adaptable and go with the flow.
- **Stay Positive:** Focus on the good things about having two homes and two families that care for you.

Templates for Co-Parents

MANAGING CHILD-RELATED EXPENSES WORKSHEET

Instructions:

1. **List all child-related expenses:** Write down all the expenses related to your child(ren). This may include regular monthly expenses as well as occasional or one-time costs.
2. **Categorize the expenses:** Use the categories provided to help organize your spending.
3. **Track your spending:** Use the last section to plan and review your spending over the next month.

1. Monthly Child-Related Expenses

Expense Category	Expense Description	Monthly Amount	Notes
Housing	Rent/Mortgage		
Utilities	Electricity, water, petrol, internet		
Food	Groceries, meals		
Clothing	New clothes, shoes		
Education	School fees, supplies, tutoring		
Healthcare	Insurance, doctor visits, meds		
Extracurricular Activities	Sports, music, dance		
Transportation	Petrol, public transport, car expenses		
Childcare	Daycare, babysitting		
Miscellaneous	Gifts, entertainment, activities		
Total Monthly Expenses			

2. One-Time Expenses

Expense Description	Amount	Date	Notes
Example: Birthday Party			
Total One-Time Expenses			

3. Unexpected Costs

List any unexpected child-related expenses you might anticipate:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4. Monthly Budget Planning

Use this section to plan your monthly budget based on your expenses and income.

Monthly Income	Amount
Parent 1 Income	
Parent 2 Income	
Total Income	

Total Monthly Expenses	
Budget Left (Income - Expenses)	

5. Reviewing Your Expenses

1. What child-related expense surprised you the most?

○ _____

2. Is there any area where you can reduce expenses?

○ _____

3. How can you better plan for unexpected costs in the future?

○ _____

4. Discuss with your co-parent how you will manage these expenses together.

○ _____

6. Action Steps

Based on your review, list at least three action steps you can take to manage child-related expenses more effectively:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

JOINT VS. INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS WORKSHEET

Instructions:

1. Use this worksheet to identify decisions related to your child’s upbringing.
2. Discuss each item with your co-parent and classify them as either a **Joint Decision** or an **Individual Decision**.
3. Use the space provided to add any additional notes or considerations.

Decision Categories

Decision Area	Specific Decision/Example	Joint Decision (J)	Individual Decision (I)	Notes/Considerations
Education	School choice			
	Special education needs			
	Extracurricular activities			
	Homework expectations			
Health & Wellness	Medical care (doctor, dentist)			
	Vaccinations			
	Dietary choices			
	Mental health support			
Daily Routine	Bedtime schedule			
	Morning routines			
	Chores and responsibilities			
	Screen time limits			
Holidays & Celebrations	Holiday schedules			
	Birthdays (celebration plans)			
	Family traditions (new or old)			
	Vacations and travel plans			
Discipline	Rules and boundaries			
	Consequences for misbehaviour			
	Communication about discipline			
	Encouragement and praise			

Decision Area	Specific Decision/Example	Joint Decision (J)	Individual Decision (I)	Notes/Considerations
Finances	Child support and financial contributions			
	Education costs (tuition, supplies)			
	Extracurricular costs (sports, camps)			
	Medical expenses			
Other	Changes in living arrangements			
	Family dynamics (new partners, step-siblings)			
	Relocation (moving to a new area)			
	Significant life events (remarriage, etc.)			

Reflection Questions:

1. **What decisions do we find most challenging to discuss or agree upon?**
 - _____
2. **How can we improve our communication regarding joint and individual decisions?**
 - _____
3. **Are there any upcoming decisions that we need to address? If so, list them here.**
 - _____
4. **How can we ensure that our child feels comfortable expressing their thoughts on these decisions?**
 - _____

Action Plan:

1. **Schedule a Meeting:** Set a specific time to review and discuss this worksheet together.
 - Date: _____ Time: _____
2. **Create a Follow-Up System:** Decide how often you will revisit this worksheet to ensure it remains relevant and up-to-date.
 - Frequency: _____
3. **Set Communication Guidelines:** Determine how you will communicate about decisions moving forward (e.g., via text, email, or in-person meetings).
 - _____

PARENTING SCHEDULE WORKSHEET

Instructions:

1. Fill in your child's information at the top.
2. Use the tables below to outline your parenting schedule.
3. Discuss and finalize the schedule with your co-parent.
4. Review the schedule regularly and adjust as necessary.

CHILD INFORMATION

Child's Name:	
Date of Birth:	
School/Daycare Name:	

1. Weekly Parenting Schedule

Day of the Week	Parent 1	Parent 2	Notes
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

2. Holiday and Special Events Schedule

Holiday/Event	Date	Parent Responsible	Notes
Easter			
Christmas			
Birthdays			
School Holidays			
Other Events			

3. Transportation and Pickup/Drop-off Details

Event	Location	Parent Responsible	Time	Notes
School Drop-off				
School Pickup				
Extracurricular Activities				
Other Visits				

4. Special Considerations and Notes

- **Communication Preferences:**

- **Important Contacts:**

- **Doctor:** _____
- **School Contact:** _____
- **Emergency Contact:** _____

- **Other Notes/Considerations:**

5. Review and Adjustments

- **Review Schedule Date:** _____
- **Notes from Review:**

- **Adjustments Needed:**

CO-PARENTING BOUNDARIES WORKSHEET

This worksheet is designed to help you and your co-parent identify, establish, and maintain healthy boundaries that will improve your co-parenting relationship. By completing the following steps, you'll create a clear framework that protects both your relationship and your child's well-being.

STEP 1: REFLECTION ON PERSONAL NEEDS

Before discussing boundaries with your co-parent, take time to reflect on your own needs and expectations. Answer the following questions to help clarify what is important to you.

- | |
|--|
| 1. What are the key areas where I feel boundaries are most important?
(e.g., communication, decision-making, time management, personal space) |
| 2. Are there specific situations that have caused conflict or discomfort in the past? |
| 3. What do I need from my co-parent to feel respected and supported in my role? |
| 4. How do I want to handle personal topics or emotions when communicating with my co-parent? |

STEP 2: IDENTIFY KEY CO-PARENTING BOUNDARIES

Work through the following categories to define specific boundaries that will guide your co-parenting relationship. Consider both your own perspective and what is fair for your co-parent.

1. COMMUNICATION BOUNDARIES

How will we communicate? (Choose a method: text, email, phone, in-person meetings, co-parenting apps)

When will we communicate? (Set times or guidelines for non-urgent and urgent matters)

What is off-limits to discuss? (Personal issues, past relationship matters, etc.)

How will we handle disagreements? (De-escalation strategies, use of mediation if necessary)

2. PARENTING TIME BOUNDARIES

How will we handle schedule changes? (Minimum notice required for changes, flexibility expectations)

What is the process for vacations and special events? (Scheduling holidays, birthdays, school events)

What are the boundaries for parenting time overlaps? (Visiting the child during the other parent's time, drop-offs/pick-ups)

3. DECISION-MAKING BOUNDARIES

Which decisions will be made jointly, and which can be made independently? (Medical, educational, extracurricular, religious)

How will we handle disagreements on important decisions? (Mediation, seeking third-party advice, compromise)

4. PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

What are the limits on personal interactions? (Discussing new relationships, social media sharing, meeting new partners)

How do we want to maintain personal privacy? (Financial matters, personal life, interactions with friends and family)

STEP 3: SETTING BOUNDARIES FOR THE CHILD'S WELL-BEING

1. How will we ensure consistency for our child between homes? (e.g., bedtime routines, discipline, screen time rules)

2. How can we keep our child from being caught in the middle of conflicts? (e.g., not discussing disagreements in front of the child)

3. What are our shared expectations for supporting our child emotionally? (e.g., encouraging positive relationships with both parents)

STEP 4: BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE AND REVIEW

Establishing boundaries is only the first step. Consider how you and your co-parent will maintain and adjust these boundaries over time.

1. How will we check in and reassess our boundaries? (Set a timeline: quarterly, biannually, or annually)

2. What will we do if a boundary is crossed? (Discuss consequences and how to address any issues that arise)

3. What is our strategy for addressing changes in life circumstances? (e.g., new partners, relocation, changes in work schedules)

STEP 5: AGREEMENT ON BOUNDARIES

Once you've completed the worksheet, meet with your co-parent to discuss and finalize your co-parenting boundaries. You can use this space to summarize your key agreements:

COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS

PARENTING TIME AGREEMENTS

DECISION-MAKING AGREEMENTS

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES AGREEMENTS

CO-PARENTING PLAN

This plan provides a structured framework to help parents navigate co-parenting effectively, ensuring the best interests of the child while establishing clear communication and responsibilities.

Parents:

Parent 1 Name:
Parent 2 Name:

Child(ren):

Child 1 Name (DOB):
Child 2 Name (DOB):
Child 3 Name (DOB):

Date of Agreement:

[Insert Date]

I. PARENTING TIME SCHEDULE

Weekdays:
Parent 1's Time: [Days and times]
Parent 2's Time: [Days and times]
Weekends:
Parent 1's Time: [Weekend rotation if any, specify times]
Parent 2's Time: [Weekend rotation if any, specify times]
Holidays:
Odd Years:
[e.g., Easter with Parent 1, Christmas with Parent 2, etc.]
Even Years:
[e.g., Easter with Parent 2, Christmas with Parent 1, etc.]
Holidays:

Parent 1's Time: [Days and times]
Parent 2's Time: [Days and times]
2. Special Occasions:
Birthdays:
The child's birthday will be spent with [specify parent or rotating] or shared between parents.
Parent 1's birthday: [Include schedule details].
Parent 2's birthday: [Include schedule details].
School Events/Extracurriculars:
Both parents are encouraged to attend school events, performances, and extracurricular activities, unless mutually agreed otherwise.

II. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS

1. General Communication:

- a. Parents agree to communicate respectfully about all child related matters. All major decisions will be discussed before they are made.

2. Preferred Methods:

- a. [Email, Coparenting app, Text, Phone, or in-person]
- b. Response time: Both parents agree to respond within [24 or 48 hours] for nonemergency matters.

3. Emergency Communication:

- a. In the event of an emergency regarding the child, the parent with the child will contact the other parent immediately via [Phone, Text, etc.].

4. Decision-making Authority:

- a. Major Decisions (e.g., Education, Medical, Religion):
 - i. Both parents must agree on major decisions related to the child's education, medical needs, or religious upbringing.
 - ii. If a disagreement arises, the parents will seek mediation.
- b. Day-to-day Decisions:
 - i. Each parent may make day to day decisions for the child during their parenting time (e.g., meals, bedtime, activities).

III. CHILD'S WELLBEING AND ADJUSTMENT

1. Consistency Across Homes:

- a. Both parents agree to create a stable, consistent environment for the child. Basic routines such as bedtime, homework, and discipline should be similar to reduce stress for the child.

2. Emotional Support:

- a. Both parents agree to support the child emotionally during transitions between homes. Neither parent will speak negatively about the other in front of the child or involve the child in adult matters.

3. Maintaining Relationships:

- a. Both parents will encourage the child to have a positive relationship with the other parent and extended family (e.g., grandparents, aunts/uncles). Phone calls or video chats with the other parent will be allowed during reasonable hours if the child desires.

IV. FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Child Support:

- a. Child support will be paid according to the court order.
- b. Any changes to child support must be agreed upon or handled through legal channels.

2. Shared Expenses:

- a. Both parents agree to share costs related to:
 - i. Medical expenses (uninsured): Split [50/50] or other percentage.
 - ii. Educational expenses: Split [50/50] or other percentage.
 - iii. Extracurricular activities: Split [50/50] or other percentage.
 - iv. Clothing and Supplies: [How costs will be shared or if the parent with primary custody will handle it.]
3. Expenses should be documented, and reimbursements should be made within [X] days of receiving proof of expense.

V. RESOLVING CONFLICTS

1. Dispute Resolution:

- a. If a disagreement arises that the parents cannot resolve on their own, they agree to first seek mediation before pursuing any legal action. Mediation will take place within [30 days] of the dispute arising.

2. Modifying the Co-parenting Plan:

- a. This plan can be modified as the child's needs change or as circumstances arise. Any modifications must be agreed upon in writing by both parents.

VI. OTHER AGREEMENTS

1. Relocation:

- a. If either parent plans to move more than [X miles] away, they must provide [60 or 90 days] notice to the other parent. The moving parent must also propose a revised parenting schedule to accommodate the change in location.

2. Introduction of New Partners:

- a. Both parents agree to wait [X months] before introducing a new partner to the child. Both parents will communicate this decision in advance to ensure the child’s adjustment is prioritized.

3. Social Media:

- a. Photos and information about the child will not be posted on social media without both parents’ consent.

VII. FINAL AGREEMENT AND SIGNATURES

We, the undersigned, agree to abide by the terms set out in this coparenting plan and prioritize the wellbeing of our child(ren) above all.

Parent 1 Signature:

Date: _____

Parent 2 Signature:

Date: _____

CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING

1. COMMUNICATION	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Establish Open Communication: Agree on preferred communication methods (text, phone, email).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Schedule Regular Check-ins: Set regular times to discuss the child's needs and any updates.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use Positive Language: Avoid negative remarks about each other in front of the child.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Active Listening: Make a conscious effort to listen to each other's concerns and perspectives.
2. PARENTING SCHEDULE	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Create a Parenting Schedule: Develop a detailed schedule that outlines custody arrangements (weekly, monthly).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Include Holidays and Special Events: Plan for holidays, birthdays, and vacations in advance.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document Pick-up/Drop-off Locations: Clearly define where exchanges will occur.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Plan for Flexibility: Include provisions for last-minute changes or emergencies.
3. FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Child Support Agreements: Ensure clear agreements regarding child support payments.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Share Expenses: Outline how expenses will be divided (education, healthcare, extracurricular activities).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Track Expenses: Keep a record of child-related expenses and contributions from both parents.
4. 4. DECISION-MAKING	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Joint Decisions: Identify key areas where joint decisions are necessary (education, healthcare, religion).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conflict Resolution: Establish a method for resolving disagreements (mediation, counselling).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep Records: Document important decisions and agreements to refer back to if needed.
5. BOUNDARIES AND RULES	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set Parenting Boundaries: Define what is acceptable regarding parenting roles and responsibilities.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consistent Rules: Agree on consistent rules and discipline methods to create a stable environment for the child.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Respect Each Other's Time: Avoid unnecessary interruptions during parenting time.

6. INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD'S LIFE	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Attend Important Events: Both parents should attend school events, extracurricular activities, and appointments together when possible.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Support Each Other's Relationship with the Child: Encourage the child to have a strong relationship with both parents.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Include New Relationships: Discuss how new partners or step-parents will be involved in the child's life.
7. CHILD'S WELL-BEING	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prioritize the Child's Needs: Always consider the child's emotional and physical needs in decision-making.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Encourage Open Expression: Allow the child to express their feelings about the co-parenting arrangement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Monitor Adjustment: Check in with the child about how they feel regarding transitions and visits.
8. DOCUMENTATION	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Custody Agreement: Ensure there is a clear and legally binding custody agreement in place.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Emergency Contacts: Maintain a list of emergency contacts and share it with each other.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Medical Information: Share relevant medical information, including allergies, medications, and doctor contact details.
9. SUPPORT SYSTEMS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Build a Support Network: Identify family members or friends who can support the co-parenting arrangement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Seek Professional Help if Needed: Consider counselling or parenting classes to improve co-parenting dynamics.
10. REGULAR REVIEW	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Schedule Regular Reviews: Set times to review and adjust the co-parenting arrangement as needed (every 3-6 months).
<input type="checkbox"/>	Be Open to Feedback: Encourage honest feedback from each other about what is working and what needs improvement.

Worksheets for Children

FEELINGS WORKSHEET: EXPRESSING EMOTIONS ABOUT CO-PARENTING

Instructions for Kids:

1. Take your time to think about how you feel about living in two homes or your parents' co-parenting situation.
2. Use this worksheet to express your feelings through words and drawings. There are no right or wrong answers—just be honest about your feelings.

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

List three things that make you happy about co-parenting:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

WHAT MAKES YOU SAD?

List three things that make you sad or upset about co-parenting:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

WHAT DO YOU WORRY ABOUT?

Write down any worries you have about co-parenting:

-
-
-

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

If you could change one thing about the situation, what would it be?

-
-

-
-

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Think about how you can cope with your feelings. List some things you can do when you feel sad or worried:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

WHO CAN HELP?

List people you can talk to when you have strong feelings:

-
-
-
-

A LETTER TO MY PARENTS

Write a short letter to your parents about your feelings:

Dear Mom and Dad,

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

Write a few words that describe how you feel about your parents' co-parenting arrangements?

Additional Resources

1. [My Family's Changing Activity Book for Teens \(Dealing with divorce\)](#)
2. [My Family's Changing Activity Book for Children \(Dealing with divorce\)](#)
3. [Two-hug Day \(Storybook about Divorce\)](#)
4. [Parenting from a Distance: Guide for Separated Parents Who Live Away from Their Children](#)
5. [My feelings workbook: naming & exploring emotions](#)

9. DRAW YOUR FEELINGS

Draw a picture that represents how you feel about living in two homes or your parents' co-parenting:

(Draw your picture here)



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