



# Columbine Counseling Center

## **Viewpoint** – A Quarterly Newsletter

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### **PARENTING TIME RECONSIDERED**

Recent research on parenting time schedules is critical of the traditional “one size fits all” approach. Prevailing wisdom would suggest that the standard every other weekend and midweek contact schedule for nonresidential parents should be reexamined in the light of family specific considerations. Accomplishing this task however is more complex than it appears. A host of family specific variables must be considered. They include but are not limited to interparental conflict, proximity, work related commitments, extracurricular activity, developmental position, fathering and the ever present finance-overnight issue. The remainder of this paper will focus on these concerns and offer suggestions.

#### **Interparental Conflict**

In reviewing research summaries on parenting time schedules, one dominant factor emerges: the level of conflict between the parents and *not the schedule per se* is at the heart at children’s poor adjustment to divorce over time. Shared parenting arrangements are best in family situations where conflict is low and cooperation high. Increased contact between the parents often leads to increased child exposure to interparental conflict.

Problems with one parent restricting access are some of the most difficult we face in dealing with divorce families. Crafting parenting plans with over alignment or alienation issues often require very specific scheduling and transition procedures, i.e. curbside or monitored exchanges. It may also be necessary to involve sanctions against a withholding parent in the form of increased parenting time for the non-residential parent.<sup>1</sup>

We can do a better job at teaching parents how to contain, reduce and/or eliminate conflict. Strategies for accomplishing this task include the vigorous involvement of Parenting Coordinators (PC) who can head off further legal battles by micromanaging conflict. The PC can arbitrate conflict upon agreement, teach parents how to share information, manage parent communication and in general provide a buffer zone between severely conflicted parents.

Legislative efforts should be directed at legitimizing and providing statutory authority for Parenting Coordinators. The PC can compliment Parenting Plan Evaluations in high conflict cases, and Special Advocate investigations in recent and more circumscribed disputes. Evaluations and investigations can provide the courts with much needed recommendations concerning the family system and further data as to whether the court should have the family micromanaged by a family specialist.

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<sup>1</sup> Over aligned families often require coordinated systemic intervention, the subject of an upcoming Viewpoint.

## **Proximity**

No better proximity example of the parenting time challenge exists than parenting plan problems brought about by the growth we have witnessed in the Denver metropolitan area. For example, a nonresidential parent residing in Highlands Ranch is unlikely to enjoy significant parenting time with a child who lives in North Broomfield unless one hour plus each way travel is undertaken. Urban sprawl often creates the conditions where we force children to endure hours of travel each week.

Residence issues are bound to have significant impact on parenting plans. Local moves are problematic because established schedules are disrupted. Even a local business move from one part of a city to another can significantly alter years of cooperative time-sharing in a divorced family.

The problem of relocation albeit local or out of state has no single answer which fits divorced families. Losing weekly contact with a parent can often be a difficult experience for children. Work and other relationship commitments must be weighted against these losses. Increased interparental conflict over relocation only adds to the difficulty.

Relocation can often be a highly contentious issue tearing apart even previously cooperative parents. Across the country state laws favor a variety of presumptions ranging from residential parents having the right to move to non-residential parents having the right to prevent moves. Technology has given us some recent advantages in preserving contact between non-residential parents and children, i.e., e-mail, and video conferencing. But egregious travel plans can be put in place in the name of preserving non-residential parent-child relationships. For some reason we find it hard to ask non-residential parent to do some of that travel.

## **Parent Work Related Commitments**

While we can become more creative in developing parenting schedules that are family specific, how we do this involves very specific knowledge of a family system. There are often parent work related commitments to take into consideration. How often does a parent travel? Is a parent able to get out of work to meet after school pick up requirements? Should children be forced to stay up late to accommodate a parent's schedule? What is the effect on children of frequent schedule changes brought about by a parent's work commitment? These and other work/family dynamics need to be fully appreciated in crafting parenting time schedules.

Despite work commitments, parents should find ways to be available to their children based on the child's needs and not their own. This often comes down to the values and choices we make as adults. The American obsession with success and more specifically material success can often run counter to the thoughtful consideration of parent-child contact.

## **Extracurricular Activity**

Extracurricular activity is a child specific variable which needs to be properly understood when parenting plans are being developed. How important is soccer practice attendance? Is an activity being used surreptitiously by a parent to restrict nonresidential parent access? Are there ways to involve nonresidential parents in extracurricular activities?

In addition to the financial cooperation necessary for certain activities, there is the paramount need for coordination of many schedules. Balancing free time (to just play) with homework and activity beyond academic life can and should be viewed as a developmental task for children. In a perfect world parents cooperate and help children make these choices. Often the competing needs of other children in the family must also be taken into consideration.

## **Child Development**

While most parents, attorneys and mental health professionals give lip service to child focused developmental considerations, the hard fact is that we ask children to do most of the work as it relates to the practical aspects of parenting time. It is children who must learn to live in two homes, children who usually travel and children who are asked to split their lives between two all too often suspicious foes. In crafting parenting time schedules all of us involved in the lives of these families would do well to ask for whom are we really creating this plan for?

On the flip side, developmental considerations can be misused to enforce arbitrary restrictions to nonresidential parenting time. In short, there are no simple answers as to when children can and should learn to live in two homes. How this is accomplished is often at the heart of conflict between fathers and mothers. In the end a good common sense philosophy rather than the all too often "child as property" approach should be the rule of thumb.

## **Fathering**

Recent research on father's involvement in divorced families raises significant questions about the nature of nurture and the way we view child development. Does a warm, consistent environment mean only one home? Does there need to be one psychological (or primary) caregiver? When and how do we allow fathers, who are most often nonresidential parents, to actively parent and how do we accomplish this? The answers to these questions often are contradictory. It appears that there are strong developmentally based needs in the first year for one secure and consistent environment. Combining this factor with the father research and finding creative ways of managing ones schedule can increase father involvement as important caregivers. Mothers who work are always in need of quality care during their working hours.

The challenge of integrating fathers into young children's lives will not go away by statutory reform. How we keep fathers active involves parental cooperation at a time of emotional crisis for one or both parents. Solidifying a father's role in a child's life must be accomplished within the context of other competing needs.

## **Overnights - Child Support**

No meaningful discussion of parenting time is complete without some treatment of overnights. The all too familiar competition for overnights takes away from what is appropriate for this particular child at this time in their life. Research indicates that a major harmful effect of divorce on children is inadequate income. In short, parenting time should not become the battleground for divorce finance. We need to find a way to "unbundle" parenting time and child support. We must begin to make child support decisions independent of parenting time decisions. Part of the problem is that divorce often creates two smaller economic entities (households) with less income.

## **In Summary**

Crafting parenting plans for divorcing or divorced parents is a lot like acquiring computer skills: the more one knows the less one can be sure about what one knows. We generally rely on old parenting plan models and time tested wisdom but the question remains; can we really be sure our plan is right for the children? This paper has briefly explored parenting plan variables. The challenge to parents is to put them together in some coherent way for the benefit of the children.

Perhaps we have arrived at where we began. After we carefully consider family specific variables, the truth is that some children need a defined residence and a very traditional parenting plan, while other children may benefit from large blocks of time with each parent. Trends come and go in disputed parenting time proceedings with the pendulum currently in the realm of moving children around more so than in the past. In cases where we recommend frequent moves or even dual residence plans we should at the very least stop to reconsider how many times we are asking a child to change their schedule in a week. As children age, is it reasonable to expect them to spend blocks of time in a nonresidential area while their peer based social life is developing locally? And finally, why is it that we find it so hard to ask parents to do the traveling and/or temporary relocation?

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