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Emery's Alternative Parenting Plans (Child Custody Schedules)

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Making decisions about where children will live is one of the most frightening and difficult tasks of divorce. The prospect of no longer being with your children *all* the time is bad enough. The thought of losing your children can be terrifying. The fears – and the conflicts that can stem from them – often are compounded by traditional legal language: One parent wins custody, while the loser gets only "visitation" with his own child.

Good parenting isn't a contest. Parents can take a different, more child-friendly approach to both legal negotiations and the child-rearing agreements they construct. Like many experts, I prefer to think about this challenging task as devising a *parenting plan*, a legal agreement that spells out a clear, specific schedule for children as well as guidelines for each parent's coparenting responsibilities and role in decision making. In fact, you may chose not to use terms like custody and visitation in your parenting plan.

From the beginning of your consideration of alternative parenting plans, you need to recognize several key issues.

- There is *no* single ideal schedule not joint physical custody, traditional every other weekend visitation, "bird nesting" (where the children stay in one place and the parents move back and forth), or the hundreds of variations in between. All of these arrangements can work, or none of them can. Making your parenting plan work depends upon you, your ex, and your coparenting relationship.
- Neither judges nor psychologists possess special wisdom or mysterious tests that can tell you what is best for your children. Seasoned experts will tell you that you, the parents, are in the best position, by far, to make these decisions. And if you don't agree, you need try again, be flexible, make some compromises, and create parenting plan that will work for your children. Remember: This is about your *responsibilities* as a parent, not your "rights."
- View time with your children in terms months and years not just hours, days and weeks. Your parenting plan can be a "living agreement," one that you are likely to alter as your children grow older and your family circumstances change. After all, what you decide for a 2 year old may not be best for her when she's 14 (or 4 or 7). And you probably want to experiment with your ideas about a schedule a bit now. Why? So you can see how your child reacts to a schedule instead of guessing what will or won't work. If you are willing to experiment a bit, you can make changes as needed to create an even better schedule for your children.
- Different schedules work better for children of different ages. That's why I've outlined alternatives according to the age of your children below. In general, younger children benefit from having more of a "home base." School aged children

can manage more complicated schedules – as long as the parents can help them negotiate the complications. And you need to consider a third schedule for teenagers: Their own.

- If you have more than one child, this creates both opportunities and complications. For example, a younger child may be able to handle more complicated schedules if she is moving back and forth with the added security of siblings. On the other hand, your 16 year old teenager may rebel about a week to week schedule, even though the plan is working fine for his 9 year old brother.
- Most importantly, your divorce style – your coparenting partnership – is critical to making *any* parenting plan work. Below you will see different schedules for parents with a cooperative, distant, or an angry divorce. Note that you have many more options for children of a given age – and over time – if you can to develop cooperative, businesslike relationship with your children's other parent. For detailed advice on how to develop that kind of relationship, see [The Truth about Children and Divorce](#).
- Finally, remember that these schedules are intended as *examples*. My goal is to help you to think creatively (and concretely) about your parenting plan while considering the best options for your family. I discuss the reasoning behind these schedules, and many other critical coparenting issues, in [The Truth about Children and Divorce](#).

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Infants and Babies: Birth to Eighteen Months

Traditional Options for an Angry Divorce

- Every Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., including an afternoon nap.
- Every Saturday from 9:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m.; every Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., picked up at day care and returned to other parent's home.

More Integrated Options for a Distant Divorce

- Every Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., including an afternoon nap; every Wednesday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 6:30 p.m., perhaps spending some time at the residential parent's home.
- Every Saturday from 2:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m.; every Monday and Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., picked up at day care and returned to other parent's home.

Closely Integrated Options for a Cooperative Divorce

- Every Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., including an afternoon nap; every Monday and Wednesday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 7:30 p.m.; some contact/feeding/bedtime takes place at residential parent's home.

- Two weekdays from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. (substituting for child care); every Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.; occasional Saturday overnights if the baby seems to tolerate them well.

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Toddlers: Eighteen Months to Three Years

Traditional Options for an Angry Divorce

- Every Saturday from 2:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. Overnight until 10:00 a.m. on alternate Sundays
- Every other weekend from 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, with an overnight until 11:00 a.m. on Sunday. Alternate Monday evenings from 5:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. on the Monday following the weekend spent with the residential parent.

More Integrated Options for a Distant Divorce

- Every Saturday from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., including a nap. Overnight until 9:00 a.m. on alternate Sundays. Every Wednesday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 6:30 p.m.

Closely Integrated Options for a Cooperative Divorce

- Every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. until 10:00 a.m. Sunday. Every Monday and Wednesday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 7:30 p.m.; some contact/feeding/bedtime takes place at residential parent's home.
- Two weekdays from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. (substituting for child care); every Friday from 1:00 p.m. until 12:00 p.m. on Saturday.

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Preschoolers from Three to Five Years Old

Traditional Options for an Angry Divorce

- Every Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. on Sunday.
- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. on Friday until 1:00 p.m. on Sunday. Alternate Mondays from 5:00 p.m. until 7:30 p.m. on the Monday following the weekend spent with the residential parent.

More Integrated Options for a Distant Divorce

- Every Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. on Sunday. Every Wednesday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 7:30 p.m.
- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. on Friday until 3:00 p.m. on Sunday. Every Monday and Wednesday from 11:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. picked up and returned to day care.

Closely Integrated Options for a Cooperative Divorce

- Two weekdays from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m.. (substituting for child care). Overnights every Thursday night. Every other weekend Thursday from 1:00 p.m.

until 2:00 p.m. on Sunday.

- Every Thursday from 5:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Saturday.

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Early School-Age Children from Six to Nine Years Old

Traditional Options for an Angry Divorce

- Every Friday from after school until 5:00 p.m. Saturday.
- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. Friday until 4:00 p.m. Sunday. Alternate Mondays from 5:00 p.m. until 7:30 p.m. on the Monday following the weekend spent with the residential parent.

More Integrated Options for a Distant Divorce

- Every Friday from after school until 5:00 p.m. Saturday. Every Monday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 7:30 p.m.
- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. Thursday until 4:00 p.m. Sunday. Alternate Thursday evenings from 5:00 p.m. until 7:30 p.m.

Closely Integrated Options for a Cooperative Divorce

- Every Thursday from 5:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Saturday.
- Every Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Saturday with one parent; every Saturday at 5:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday with the other parent.
- Every Monday and Tuesday with one parent; every Wednesday and Thursday with the other parent. Alternate weekends from Friday through Sunday with each parent.

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Late School-Age Children from Ten to Twelve Years Old

Traditional Options for an Angry Divorce

- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. on Friday until 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. Alternate Mondays from 5:00 p.m. until 7:30 p.m. on the Monday following the weekend spent with the residential parent.

More Integrated Options for a Distant Divorce

- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. on Thursday until 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. Every Monday evening from 4:30 p.m. until 7:30 p.m.

Closely Integrated Options for a Cooperative Divorce

- Every Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Saturday with one parent; every Saturday from 5:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday with the other

parent.

- Alternate weeks with each parent with exchanges on either Fridays or Sundays.

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Adolescents Age Thirteen to Eighteen

Traditional Options for an Angry Divorce

- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. on Friday until 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. Some flexible contact is possible during other times.

More Integrated Options for a Distant Divorce

- Every other weekend from 5:00 p.m. on Thursday until 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. Dinner on the "off" Thursday, plus some flexible contact during other "off" times.

Closely Integrated Options for a Cooperative Divorce

- Every Wednesday from 3:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Saturday with one parent; every Saturday from 5:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday with the other parent with more flexibility to meet teenager's own needs.
- Alternate weeks with each parent with some flexible contact.

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