

Residential Schedule Considerations

Newborns: Birth to Three Months (referred to as “The Fourth Trimester” or “Kangaroo Pocket Time”

**\*\*Must be handled skillfully\*\***

* **Establishing breast feeding** in the first three months should be a priority for health of the infant and mother. Best if this can be accomplished without disadvantaging the non-breast-feeding parent with regard to regular access to the infant for bonding and secure attachment.
* Daily, at minimum regular contact (multiple days a week), with both parents. The non-breast-feeding parent can provide relief to the breast feeding mom by assisting with night care, spending two-hour blocks on a daily basis as scheduled, or even multiple two-hour windows/day of secure contact and care. **The goal is to allow the infant to develop a secure bond with both parents and both parents to gain confidence in their parenting.** The non-breast-feeding parent allows for healthy breaks for self-care, a nap and so forth to prevent exhaustion and burn-out for the breast-feeding parent. These visits often happen in the breast-feeding mom’s home if possible but can include taking the baby out as long as the baby is returned for feeding needs.
* Constructive when tension is very low between parents and transitions are easy for them. Both parents are committed to what’s best for their new infant. High parental cooperation required to mitigate atmosphere of hostility /stress for the newborn.

Infants: Three to Twelve Months

**\*\*Parents will continue to need support for skillful parenting\*\***

* Breast feeding is usually established at this point and pumping is an option. Once breast-feeding is established, both parents can feed the baby, which allows for longer visits and even overnights depending on the progression of secure attachment, the infant’s temperament, and *parenting skill level*.
* Infants between four and seven months develop *object permanence*, which is to say that when an object disappears it still exists. Prior to this awareness, objects that disappear cease to exist in a meaningful way to infant. Regular, predictable contact assists the infant in developing trust in the world of their primary caregivers. Regular, predictable separation from a parent is well tolerated and does not threaten secure attachment (parents working, the occasional business trip, and so forth).
* Ideal parenting schedules include each parent providing the bedtime routine with baby 2 – 4 times a week even if provided in one parent’s home. Weekend visits can extend to eight hours on both Saturday and Sunday. Positive to have at least one full day each weekend over an every-other-weekend schedule if both parents want/need weekend time. Regular, predictable contact care-time is the goal with each parent.
* Regular and frequent contact care-time and predictable schedules help infants establish their body rhythms and maintain secure attachment.
* Many securely attached infants thrive with overnights with both parents rotating back and forth as frequently as every-other-night. These infants have a sense of home and security with their parents that extend across two residences.
* The less frequent the contact with a parent, the greater the incidence of separation anxiety from the primary parent. Infants often experience developmentally predictable separation anxiety with an onset between six and 12 months lasting two - three months, which is not an indication of insecure attachment.

Watch birth mothers for post-partum depression and burn out particularly if the birth was associated with an unexpected outcome (such as Cesarean section, loss of support during the birthing process or shortly thereafter, announcement of divorce).

Junior Toddlers: 12 – 18 Months

**\*\*Watch the baby's development, temperament, and quality of parenting\*\***

* Prolonged separations will precipitate the experience of "loss" and signs of "protest" on the part of both junior and senior toddlers. This is how a toddler tells us the experience of separation has gone from tolerable to intolerable (and frightening). A healthy residential schedule prevents regular triggering of intolerable separations. Signs of intolerable separation can include: excessive clinginess, tantrums, crying, irritability, sleep disruption, inconsolable distress, and so forth.
* A good schedule for this age group is no more than two overnights away from either parent if the parents are attempting a fully shared schedule. (2-2-2-1 starting on Sunday evening and splitting quality parenting time for the single Saturday overnight). Another option is the non-residential parent is coming to the residence on Tues / Thurs to do dinner through bedtime routine (or wake-up through drop-off at daycare) with at least one overnight each weekend (Sat 9 AM – Sun 9 AM).
* The transition from junior toddlerhood ("I've got the world by the tale!") to senior toddlerhood ("OH NO! I'm very little and everyone else is very big...") is flagged by a brain growth spurt, with increased language skills, motor skills, and ...SEPARATION ANXITY. Again, this is a normal response to rapid growth and an increased need for protection from their secure caregiver(s). Onset between 15 - 18 months, generally resolving around 20 - 22 months. Initiating an overnight schedule during the height of this developmental transition could be complicated. Regular contact with both parents continues to be very important.

Senior Toddlers: 18 - 36 months

**\*\*Just because a child *adapts* to a schedule,**

**does not indicate that it's developmentally appropriate\*\***

* Once baby lands squarely in senior toddlerhood, we see a little one with almost no vestiges of infancy. Regular rhythms, naps, sleeping through the night, feeding practices are generally well established. Play is an important part of waking time. Interest in other toddlers is typical. Capacity to interact with other little ones without assistance/supervision, though, is not quite on board. Working on impulse control and the ability to say "no" and "I do it myself."
* Since resistance and tantrums are all part of working through senior toddlerhood, transitions can become a target for working out a toddler's need to say no. This can be eased by transitions from daycare or for the current residential parent to facilitate the transition by delivering to the receiving parent. Keeping transitions between parent’s predictable, brief, to include a bit of fun-ritual for toddler is best.
* Regression in some developmental tasks, such as potty training, should not be surprising for major schedule changes initiated during this time. This will be short-lived and not cause for alarm. If developmental disruption persists beyond three months, the parents should come together to look for other causes/stresses/concerns.
* Having older siblings helps younger children with residential transitions — being part of their “pack.”
* The 2-2-2-1 schedule is still ideal or similar schedule that allows for predictable care-giving and contact with each parent. Less frequent contact with one parent can work as long as it's predictable and the toddler feels genuinely supported in both residences. Facetime is a wonderful tool to allow non-residential contact from time-to-time. An every-other-weekend schedule is likely to be confusing to the child if there's no other predictable contact in between.
* A variation on the 2-2-2-1 schedule prepares parents and toddlers an eventual 2-2-5-5 schedule is to create an overnight on Friday (pick up form daycare until Sat at 9 AM) for the Mon/Tues parent and an overnight on Sunday (Sunday 4 PM until return to daycare Monday) for the Wed/Thurs parent on the other’s weekend. The impact is to create a “cuddle bump” in the middle of what will become the “five” in the schedule when the toddler moves into the pre-school/school years. Neither parent-child group is separated from one another for extended time; a sense of a weekend (all day Sat/Sun) begins to take shape.
* For parents who are not creating a fully-shared schedule, dividing the four – five overnights in a 4/10 or 5/9 schedule are best done as a Mon/Tues (or Wed Thurs) one week and Friday/Saturday for the weekend on the other week. Depending on the age of the toddler, temperament and level of adjustment, the weekend could include Sunday night.
* Playdates with a parent are popularly used for this age group to ensure the child doesn’t go too long without contact with a parent. The more these transitions are integrated into the child’s typical routine the better. Key issue is the number of transitions a child is being asked to absorb in one day. If the child transitions easily, then great! If the child is falling-apart by the last transition, we know we’re asking too much.

Preschoolers: Ages Three until entrance to Kindergarten

**\*\*Magical thinking, fish tales, and an important growth spurt spotlights wild-life for these rapidly growing children\*\***

* Great age to continue the 2-2-5-5 schedule with the “cuddle bump” which as a child approaches the age of five, can transition to a dinner date rather than a overnight. Now the full five overnights with one parent takes shape and weekends are less impacted.
* For children beginning a two-home family life, I would recommend the cuddle bump for a minimum of one year for children under age seven and then parents determine when to drop the cuddle bump out of the schedule based on the child’s competence and adjustment. I usually write that if one parent wants the cuddle bump to go forward for another year it will, and then it can drop out if they’re not in agreement.
* Many parents opt for a 2-2-3 schedule during the preschool years. This is developmentally appropriate, but can be difficult for activity schedules and parents work life (creating predictability for longer work days when off duty, and shorter days during residential time).
* For schedules that involve more overnights with one parent than the other, breaking the overnights in groups of two (or three) is best for this age group.
* For parents who want a 6/8 schedule, having the children return Sunday after dinner from the weekend (as opposed to return to school Monday morning) can work very well for launching the school week in a very predictable manner.
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Early School-Age: Six to Eight Year Olds

**\*\*A child’s sense of family is central to their sense of comfort in the world\*\***

* There are many ways to usher a child into a two-home family in this age group. The key consideration is to “build” the schedule to support the child’s changing sense of family in a manner that allows competence building. Some parents will start with a 2-2-3 schedule and after a year progress to a 2-2-5-5. Others will consider a 3-4-4-3 and then progress to 2-2-5-5 to get full weekends as part of their longer-term schedule.
* Five overnights away from a parent are likely to unconstructively stretch a child until they are fully seven when initiating a residential schedule. For children who have been in two-home family life for a few years, the five overnights may be perfectly fine.

Schedules for Older Children: Developmental Considerations

* Parents often try out / practice a week-on/week-off schedule beginning the summer that their youngest is fully seven years old. This is a perfect time to spend some part of or all of the summer on this schedule.
* During the school year, I would not recommend a week-on/week-off schedule prior to fifth grade (age 10) except in specific circumstances for children who are clearly ready, often have older siblings, or a lifestyle that has prepared them for this rotation. Children on the spectrum may do better with a single weekly transition between homes.
* Middle-school children starting a two-home family schedule will benefit from a couple years of 2-2-5-5 over week-on/week-off in terms of emotional adjustment. Convert to week-on/week-off in high school if preferred.

Although I have focused on fully-shared (50/50) schedules, I want to be clear that I do not favor or recommend 50/50 schedules over other schedules. Parents seeking mediation / Collaborative-type divorce processes are regularly coming in requesting fully-shared schedules. The idea that any particular schedule should be the “default” does not respect the family- and child-centered importance of creating schedules that reflect the unique needs of the children and parenting capacity and role of the adults.

For a stay-at-home parent, the transition to two-home family life and sharing parenting time can require a dramatic emotional adjustment (especially with young children). Helping both parents value transitioning in a thoughtful and respectful manner can preserve the co-parenting relationship for years to come. Beginning for some period of time as a 5/9, progressing to a 6/8 and resting into a 7/7 schedule may take a couple years, but can mean the difference between healthy post-divorce adjustment and *on-going conflicts and unsettled children* with damaging effects for everyone.

Similarly, a 50/50 schedule holds HIGH symbolic value for parents who want to be honored/recognized as “full” parents. Again, unpacking the symbolic nature of “50/50” can assist in choosing schedules that actually work better for all members of the two-home family not limited to percentages. I tell parents they are two 100% parents on duty at different times for the benefit of their kiddos and two-home family life. The notion that a parent is disadvantaged in the eyes of the court regarding relocation related to residential schedules results in parents fighting over even one overnight that often has nothing to do with children, parenting capacity, or anything significant other than *fear.* This will prevent many parents from having the openness to transitioning their children into two-home family life in a less dramatic manner: "I'm not moving out unless I have a 50/50 schedule."

Fear of losing their children drives parents in all kinds of unproductive directions when determining a parenting plan. As professionals, assisting them to move out of fear, settle down, and realize the enormous value of two “good enough” parents caring for children assists with making sound, respectful decisions for the family. Building a parenting plan as a defensive tool for future litigation results in disrupting the ideal of family- and child-centered outcomes.

Our job is to find a way to resolve this tension in ways that support the next generation of children of divorced parents.