



CO-PARENTING GUIDE

Working Together For Our Children



Cuyahoga Job and Family Services
Office of Child Support Services

Children **need** and **deserve** the *love, care & support* of both their parents

When parents split up, it's hard on everyone in the family, especially children. This guide is full of information about ways parents who live apart can work together to take care of their children.

In this Guide:

- Parenting Time & the PTOC Program
- What is Co-Parenting, and Why Do It?
- Communicating With the Other Parent
- Parenting Plan: Basic Elements
- Talking to Your Children
- When Your Kids Visit the Other Parent
- Consistency
- Co-Parenting DON'TS
- Child Safety
- Domestic Violence
- Conflict with the Other Parent
- Modifying a Parenting Time Agreement
- Resources for Parents and Children

Adapted from the Texas Attorney General's "For Our Children" Co-Parenting Guide, helpguide.org, and the Ohio Supreme Court's "Planning for Parenting Time" Guide, and the Montgomery County Co-Parenting Guide.

This Guide is for general educational and informational purposes only, and is not intended as a substitute for the advice of competent licensed professionals. Only a qualified attorney familiar with the relevant law may give legal advice.



Parenting Time & The Parenting Time Opportunities For Children Program

Parenting time, also known as “visitation,” is the amount of time a child spends with each parent, as agreed upon in a plan or ordered by a court. Parenting time is not usually addressed when unmarried parents establish a child support order.

The Cuyahoga County Job & Family Services, Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) offers unmarried parents a free and simple way to create a legally-enforceable parenting time plan at their administrative support hearing. Such plans can help parents manage their co-parenting relationship and reduce conflict that can harm their children.

Our program, available through a federal grant, is called **“Parenting Time Opportunities for Children”** (PTOC). PTOC does not require either parent to hire an attorney, pay a filing fee, or file a motion in court.

Parents can choose between two options for establishing a parenting time order: 1) a Standard Order of Parenting Time issued pursuant to Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court’s Local Rule 29; or 2) a mediated, customized parenting time agreement facilitated by the Cuyahoga County Public Safety & Justice Services, Office of Mediation.

Only Option #1 is available on the date of your administrative support hearing.

Option #2 requires an additional referral; however, you may schedule your mediation appointment on the date of your administrative support hearing.

PTOC Offers Parents Many Benefits:

- Save \$120.00 — the filing fee it would normally cost to seek a parenting time order for one child through court.
- One federal study estimated that support payments increased by an average of \$56 per month after mediation. Another reported that parent-child contact from non-custodial parents in parenting time programs increased by 33-50%.
- Addressing child support and parenting time in one process is efficient and enables parents to avoid multiple administrative and judicial hearings.
- Children with two involved parents have greater emotional security, less depression, fewer behavioral problems and better academic achievement.

What Is Co-Parenting, & Why Do It?

“Co-parenting” is when both parents work together to raise their children, even after the marriage or romantic relationship is over. This is not a skill that most people are taught, but this guide will give you some helpful tips to successfully co-parent.

Many parents find that co-parenting classes help them learn new skills and gain support from other parents who are going through a similar situation. Please refer to the resources listed at the end of this guide to learn about cooperative parenting courses available near you.

Co-parenting helps children deal with the changes that happen when their parents are no longer together. Even though you may not want to talk to the other parent after the romantic relationship ends, you still have a very important relationship, and it’s the most important one of all — a parenting relationship.

All children need love and support from both parents. Parents who live apart can still provide these things if they work together.

Making shared decisions, interacting with each other at drop-offs, or just speaking to your co-parent may seem impossible. While co-parenting may not be an easy solution, it is the best way to ensure your child’s needs are met. The key to co-parenting is to focus on your child. Co-parenting is not about your feelings. It’s about your child’s happiness, stability and future well-being. It’s okay to be hurt and angry, but your feelings don’t have to dictate your behavior. Instead, do what’s best for your children.



Communicating With The Other Parent

Peaceful, consistent communication is essential to co-parenting success. It begins with your mindset. Think about communication with your co-parent as serving the highest purpose: your child's well-being.

Speaking over the phone or exchanging texts or emails works most of the time. The goal is to establish conflict-free communication.

The following methods can help you maintain effective communication:

- **Set a business-like tone.** Speak or write to your co-parent as you would a co-worker. Be cordial, be respectful and show restraint. Read over emails/texts before pressing send. Avoid conversations when you are upset or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- **Make requests.** Instead of making statements which can be misinterpreted as demands, try framing phrases as requests such as "Would you be willing to?" or "Can we try?"
- **Listen.** Even if you disagree, communicate to your co-parent that you've understood his or her point of view. Remember listening is not the same as giving approval.
- **Keep conversations kid-focused.** Control the content of your communication. Talk about your child's needs, not yours.
- **Apologize.** When you make a mistake or there's a misunderstanding, apologize for what you've done.
- **Keep talking.** If you disagree about something important, continue to communicate. If you still cannot agree, consider talking to a neutral third party. The Office of Mediation is a great resource for free and low-cost mediation assistance. For information call their office at 216.698.4996 or go to: www.cuyahogacounty.us, click on the A-Z directory and then scroll down to Mediation and click on it.
- **Don't sweat the small stuff.** If you disagree about important issues like a surgery or choice of school, by all means keep the discussions going. But if you want your child in bed by 7:30 and your co-parent says 8:00, let it go and save your energy for bigger issues. When you show flexibility, your co-parent is more likely to be flexible with you.
- **Compromise.** You will need to come around to your co-parent's point of view as often as he or she comes around to yours. Compromise allows you both to "win" and makes both of you more likely to be flexible in the future.



Parenting Plan: Basic Elements

A parenting plan can be a formal legal document or an informal plan agreed to by both parents. It describes how the children will spend time with each parent. Remember, you can change anything about the plan as long as both parents agree. If you don't have a parenting plan, you and the other parent should discuss the following:

The basic elements of a parenting plan

- Determine when the child/children will spend time with each parent on a normal basis.
- List important vacation and holiday times (including school breaks and birthdays) and decide how to split that time.
- Determine how you will make temporary and permanent changes to the parenting plan.
- Determine who will make day-to-day decisions, and how you will discuss and make important decisions together.
- Decide what to do if you or the other parent moves to a new residence that is in another town or state.

- Decide how you will resolve future conflicts to avoid going to court.
- Arrange for the financial and medical support of the child/children (like how you will split costs of things like clothes, school supplies, hobbies and extracurricular activities.)
- Determine how the exchange of the child/children will take place.

The next page lists issues that may come up when contemplating a parenting time plan. Take some time before your hearing or mediation to write out how you and the other parent will make decisions about these issues.

Even if the court does not require it, parents can create an informal written plan - an agreement both parents make about how to raise your child/children.

It may work better for each parent to do this individually, and then talk about how to come to an agreement if there are differences.

Considerations

For A Mediated Parenting Agreement

1. Which house is identified as “home base” for school purposes?
2. Picking up and dropping off the child/children?
3. Extracurricular activities and payment for these activities?
4. Religion and church attendance?
5. Medical and mental health treatment for the child/children and health care choices (including insurance plans, doctors, medical procedures)?
6. Internet access and restrictions?
7. Education choices, such as schooling, tutoring, summer camp or classes for the gifted?
8. College savings?
9. Privacy (such as a private phone line)?
10. Who holds onto the child’s birth certificate, Social Security card, etc.?

For Older Children & Teenagers

1. Who holds onto the passports if traveling out of the country is permitted?
2. Getting jobs?
3. Driving and car insurance?
4. Cell phone purchase and use?
5. Curfew?
6. Tattoos and body piercing?
7. Smoking and drug testing?
8. Consent to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces?



The Ohio Supreme Court’s “Planning for Parenting Time” Guide offers multiple parenting plans and options you may consider, at:

supremecourt.ohio.gov/publications/JCS/parentingguide.pdf



Good Reasons To Not Argue With The Other Parent

- Hearing hurtful things about either parent can hurt your kids' self-esteem. Your kids love both of their parents and don't want to hear bad things about either of them.
- Arguing makes it harder to work together.
- Your kids need to see that you can talk with respect to the other parent.

Good Reasons To Talk Regularly With The Other Parent

- You will both feel more involved in your kids' lives.
- You know what your kids are up to, even when they're with the other parent.
- Regular communication helps keep little misunderstandings from becoming big conflicts.

- Double check what your kids tell you. Sometimes children will say things that may not be true about what goes on in the other parent's home, like they get to use curse words at dad's house or mom thinks school is a waste of time. Communicating often with the other parent will help you determine whether or not these things are true.

Talking To Your Children

Helping children understand why parents don't live together is hard. When talking to your children remember:

- Be honest. Consider what your children can understand and explain it at their level.
- Stress how much you and the other parent love your kids and will always be there for them.
- Counseling may help your children (or yourself) deal with issues. Your children might like to talk to someone other than their parents about these things.
- Don't tell your children that their other parent isn't paying child support. This only increases their feelings of abandonment.





When Your Kids Spend Time With The Other Parent

It may take time for both you and your children to get used to them going back and forth. It's easier on your children when they see their parents work together. They learn how to communicate by watching you.

The actual move from one household to another, whether it happens every few days or just on weekends, can be a very hard time for children. Every reunion with one parent is also a separation from the other.

Strategies To Help Make Drop Offs Easier

- **Help children anticipate change.** Make sure your kids know the schedule and remind kids they'll be leaving for the other parent's house a day or two before the visit. Consider creating a parenting time calendar with the days marked for each parent.
- **Pack in advance.** Depending on their age, help children pack their bags well before they leave so that they don't forget anything they'll miss. Encourage packing familiar reminders like a special stuffed toy or photograph.
- **Always deliver** your child to the other parent. Communicate about expectations for pick up and drop off and follow through.
- **Reassure them** it's good for them to spend time with both of their parents.
- **Work together** with the other parent to make drop-offs go smoothly, and come up with a parenting schedule that will allow your kids to spend as much time as possible with each parent.
- **Be positive.**
- **Be on time!** Or call the other parent if you're running late.

Consistency

While exposure to different perspectives is healthy, children also need to know they are living under the same basic set of expectations. Aiming for consistency between your home and your co-parent avoids confusion for your children.

Don't fail to show up when you say you are coming to pick up your child. Children may remember forever the feeling of abandonment this creates.

Here are some tips:

Rules: Rules don't have to be exactly the same between two households, but if you establish generally consistent guidelines, your kids won't have to bounce back and forth between two radically different disciplinary environments. Important rules for homework, curfews and off-limits activities should be followed in both households.

Discipline: Try to follow similar systems of consequences for broken rules, even if the infraction didn't happen under your roof. If your kids have lost TV privileges at your co-parent's house, follow through with the restriction.

Schedule: Make meals, homework and bedtimes similar. Work your kids' schedules into the parenting time plan so they can continue to do all the activities they enjoy.

Gifts: Allow your kids to take their new toys and clothes to the other parent's home.

Environment: Try to keep kids in the same school and around their friends.

Change: Your kids grow and situations change. You may need to re-visit the rules and make decisions together about how they should change.



Co-Parenting Tips

DO NOT change the parenting time schedule or time without working it out with the other parent.

DO NOT panic, get angry or feel insulted if your kids cry and ask for the other parent during your time with them. Ask them if they would like to call the other parent. Sometimes, children (especially young children) just need to make sure the other parent is still there.

DO NOT send your new boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse to pick up the children or leave them in charge of the kids for long periods of time, especially early in the new relationship.

DO NOT use your children as messengers between parents (to send bills, notes or anything else). It's very hard on kids to be put in the middle of their parents' relationship.

DO NOT discuss co-parenting issues with or in front of your child. Friends, therapists or even pets make good listeners when you need to get negative feelings off your chest. Exercise can also be a healthy outlet for letting off steam.

DO NOT press your children for information about their time with the other parent. This will lessen their enjoyment of the time they spend with the other parent and put them in the middle of your adult relationship. It's fine to ask how it went, just don't try to get them to give all the details.

DO NOT make assumptions or jump to conclusions. If your child seem moody after spending time with the other parent, don't assume the visit was bad. If your kids tell you about problems or things that concern you regarding the other parent or the other parent's new partner, speak with the other parent before jumping to conclusions.



Child Safety

When child abuse is reported, experts investigate. If neglect or abuse is proven, services such as counseling may be offered. In some cases, parenting time may be revoked and the children placed in a safe environment. You have immunity from civil or criminal liability if you report abuse in the honest belief that a child is in danger of being abused. If you suspect child abuse or neglect, call **Cuyahoga County Children and Family Services at 216.696.KIDS (5437)**.

The court may order supervised visitation for the other parent if they deem it is needed.

Monitored exchanges and visits are offered at Safe & Sound Supervised Visitation Program, where staff members observe the visit, record activities, and intervene if necessary to protect the emotional and physical safety of the child.

The Safe Exchange Program offers a neutral location where parents can meet to drop-off and pick-up their child (ren) for scheduled visitation.

Safe & Sound Supervised Visitation Program, 2806 Payne Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44114, 216.229.2420

Domestic Violence

If you are a victim of domestic violence, help is available through the 24-hour Domestic Violence Hotline at 216.391.HELP (4357). Advocates can assist you with crisis intervention, support, referrals or just general information.

For services outside of the Greater Cleveland area, please call the **Nation DV hotline at 1.800.799.SAFE (7233)**.

For more information regarding the Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center, please visit www.dvcac.org.

Parents who feel in danger from a family or household member may contact police and/ or seek a protection order. You do not need a lawyer to ask the court for a protection order, and the process is free.

The Ohio Domestic Violence Resource Center's website has information about procedures for obtaining a protection order at:

ohiolegalservices.org/public/domestic-violence/ohio_domestic_violence_resource_center

The Family Justice Center also provides assistance with protection orders. Please **call 216-443-7345** for assistance.

Conflict With The Other Parent

Conflict with the other parent is bound to occur, but it does not have to hurt your kids and you can take steps to prevent it.

Try to keep arguments away from your kids. If you think of communication between yourself and the other parent as a job, conflict and arguments should be less likely to occur.

The other parent may not approach parenting like you do, but that doesn't make their approach wrong — just different. Tolerance of these differences will go a long way toward reducing conflict, and it will help your child to see that you and the other parent can still be respectful of each other.

If the other parent is not letting you see your kids at the dates and times that you are supposed to see them, write down each date and time in a journal or calendar.

Consider bringing an unbiased witness (e.g. a neighbor rather than a significant other or relative) to the exchange. This evidence can be used in court to help you gain access to your children.

If you and the other parent have a conflict or do not communicate well, call the Juvenile Justice Center, Office of Mediation (216) 698-4996 for assistance.

The Center can provide a mediator to help the two of you say what you need to say and perhaps hear one another in a different way than you have before. The Center can also offer suggestions about how to communicate more effectively.



Modifying A Parenting Time Agreement

Parenting agreements may need to change over time to better meet the needs of your kids as they grow up or as your situation changes. You will need to stay in regular communication with the other parent to keep making the best decisions possible for your kids.

Cuyahoga County OCSS cannot help either parent enforce or modify a parenting time order and your OCSS cannot address prior parenting time orders as part of an administrative review and adjustment.

How To Modify Or Enforce A Parenting Time Order

To modify or enforce a parenting time order, you will need to file a motion in Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court. Pick up Pro-Se forms at the Custody Intake Office, which is located on the 2nd floor of the Juvenile Justice Center (JJC) or, at the Office of Child Support Services.

The address for the **JJC is 9300 Quincy Ave., Cleveland, OH 44106** and they can be reached at **(216) 443-3149**. Walk in hours at JJC are Monday-Friday from 9:00-1:00 pm and 2:00-4:00 pm. (No appointment is necessary). The Pro-Se Center is closed between the hours of 1-2:00 pm.

Alternatively, parties can seek a mediated parenting time agreement through **Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court Office of Mediation**, which provides free or low cost conflict management services, including assistance with mediated parenting time agreements and dispute resolution. Call **(216) 698-4996** for information or to schedule mediation.

You may also contact the **Legal Aid Society of Cleveland at (216) 687-1900** to learn about free legal clinics and services in your area.

You may also seek assistance from your private legal counsel/attorney.



Other Things To Consider

Unless the courts have ordered something different, both parents have the right to:

- **Receive** information concerning the health, education and welfare of the kids
- **Talk** with the other parent before making a decision concerning the health, education and well-being of the kids
- **Access** their children's medical, dental, psychological and educational records
- **Consult** with the kids' doctors and school officials
- **Attend** school activities
- **Be listed** as an emergency contact on the kids' records
- **Consent to medical** treatment during an emergency
- **Be offered** the chance to take care of the children during the other parent's time if the other parent has something that keeps them from the children

There are some extra things that parents should keep in mind:

- **Alcohol consumption:** Limit the amount of alcohol you consume during your time with your kids, especially if alcohol has been a problem before. Never drive with your children if you've been drinking.
- **Travel:** When planning trips for business or pleasure, with or without your kids, keep your kids' schedules and your parenting plan in mind.



Resources For Parents & Children

Office of Child Support Services

1640 Superior Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44114
Main 216-443-5100
Toll Free Ohio 800-443-1431
Fax (216) 515-8484
Email: CuyCSEA@jfs.ohio.gov
www.cjfs.cuyahogacounty.us

Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court

Juvenile Justice Center
9300 Quincy Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106
Court Services (Info): (937) 496-7908
Pro Se Center, located on the 2nd floor: (216) 443-3149 for assistance with filing your own motions at Juvenile Court.
www.juvenile.cuyahogacounty.us

Legal Resources/Mediation

The Legal Aid Society
1223 West Sixth Street
Cleveland, OH 44113
New intakes are processed via phone: 888-817-3777 (toll-free Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake and Lorain counties) or (216) 687-1900 (Cleveland local)
Cuyahoga County Office of Mediation, locations at the Juvenile Justice Center (3rd floor) and the Office of Child Support Services. (216) 698-4996

Ohio Legal Services

www.Ohiolegalservices.org

Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center (Greater Cleveland)
24-hour Domestic Violence Helpline: (216) 391-HELP (4357)
Family Helpline: (216) 229-8800
www.dvcac.org

Resources For Parents & Children

National Domestic Violence Hotline

24/7 Hotline: 1 (800) 799-SAFE (7233) 1 (800) 787-3224 (TTY)

Ohio Domestic Violence Network

Ohio Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-934-9840

www.odvn.org

Cleveland Rape Crisis Center

526 Superior Ave #1400

Cleveland, OH 44114

24-hour Hotline: (216) 619-6192

www.clevelandrapecrisis.org

Family Justice Center

75 Erieview Plaza, 5th floor

Cleveland, Ohio 44114

(216) 443-7345

www.ja.cuyahogacounty.us/en-US/wvsc-new.aspx

YWCA Greater Cleveland

4014 Prospect Avenue

Cleveland, OH 44106

Phone: (216) 881-6878

www.ywcaofcleveland.org

Supervised Visitation:

Safe & Sound Supervised Visitation Program and Safe Exchange Program

2806 Payne Avenue

Cleveland, OH 44114

(216) 229-2420

www.dvcac.org

Community Resource Guide:

http://cfs.cuyahogacounty.us/pdf_cfs/en-US/2015-CFSResourceGuide.pdf

Resources For Parents & Children

Fatherhood

Cuyahoga County Fatherhood Initiative
1640 Superior Avenue, Suite 80
Cleveland, Ohio 44114
(216) 348-3967

www.fatherhoodinitiative.cuyahogacounty.us

Ohio Commission on Fatherhood

www.fatherhood.ohio.gov

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Cleveland

4614 Prospect Avenue, Suite 410
Cleveland, OH 44103
Phone: (216) 621-8223

www.wementoryouth.org

Comprehensive Services

Help Link of Greater Cleveland Phone Number: 211

www.211cleveland.org

Family & Children First Council

310 W. Lakeside Ave., Suite 500
Cleveland, Ohio 44113

Parenting Programs

Did you know that there are 50 locations that provide parenting programs in Cuyahoga County?

To find a location close to you, contact either the Cuyahoga County Fatherhood Initiative OR United Way's 2-1-1 line.

support

care

LOVE





Cuyahoga Job and Family Services

Office of Child Support Services

www.cjfs.cuyahogacounty.us

216-443-5100 Fax 216-344-2997

1640 Superior Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44114



United Way 2-1-1

Dial 2-1-1 or visit www.211oh.org

2-1-1 helps people understand, find
and access community resources

24 hours a day, every day

web portal: www.jfs.ohio.gov/ocs



www.facebook.com/CuyahogaCountyOfficeOfChildSupportServices

[@cjfsoutreach](https://twitter.com/cjfsoutreach)



<http://cjfs.cuyahogacounty.us/boldchat/>