

A photograph of a person and a child from behind, both wearing red and white Santa hats. They are looking towards a brightly lit Christmas tree in a dimly lit room. The tree is decorated with warm white lights, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is cozy and festive.

Coping with Christmas

A guide for separated parents

Christmas is a busy time of year in the world of family law.

Many separated parents find it difficult to agree on what arrangements are best for the children at this time of year.

What works for one family, might not necessarily work for another.

It can be difficult for parents to face their first Christmas after a separation, and even harder for the children. But holidays don't have to be a battlefield.



Examples of arrangements that might work for your family

1. Children with one parent from Christmas Eve until Christmas morning, and with the other parent from after lunch on Christmas Day until Boxing Day.

This arrangement tends to work for families who live close to each other.

It has the benefit of the kids seeing both parents on Christmas Day. Usually, this arrangement alternates each year. Some families place importance on waking up with the children on Christmas morning, while others focus on Christmas Eve, or Christmas lunch.

This arrangement means the children get to experience what is special to them at Christmas with one parent in the first year, and the other parent in the second year, and so on. For some families, one parent's tradition is to celebrate at Christmas Eve while the other tends to celebrate at Christmas lunch. For those families, they might choose to keep the same arrangements every year.

It is important to consider the travel time when working out these arrangements. We don't want the children to feel rushed eating their lunch and anxious about being late to meet the parent.

2. Children with one parent for the whole week in which Christmas falls, and with the other parent the week before or the week after.

This arrangement may be more suitable if the parents do not live close to each other or who travel during the Christmas school holiday period.

The advantage is that the children do not have to travel on Christmas Day and face a potentially uncomfortable handover between the parents.

Again, usually this arrangement is one that would alternate each year so that the children get a chance to have Christmas Day with each parent alternating each year. Some parents (and of course the children) can find this arrangement particularly hard as they don't get any time on Christmas Day. As the parents, it's your role to make it easier for the children.

Sometimes we need to change the story for children depending on the age. Maybe asking Santa to write a letter to the children explaining how lucky they were to have two homes and two Christmases and telling them that Santa has scheduled a special delivery of some more of their presents on their second Christmas.

It makes the experience exciting and special for the kids, rather than them focusing on missing out on seeing them on Christmas Day.

Children will believe what you want them to believe - for example, has there been a time Santa came somewhere else because you were camping or visiting relatives?

Examples of arrangements that might work for your family

3. Children with one parent at Christmas, but spending a few hours during the day with the other parent.

This arrangement might work if you have very young children.

In some cases, experts recommend that very young children do not spend long periods of time (and/or overnight time) away from their primary carer.

In most cases, as the children grow older, they will spend increasing time with the other parent, and this includes at Christmas.

4. Children spending the whole of the Christmas holidays with one parent.

This arrangement, although less common, might occur where the parents live a significant distance apart (such as in another state or overseas), and the children only get to spend school holiday time with the parent who is far away.

For the parent not seeing the children in the holidays, they might like to have an early Christmas with the children before the holidays.

Or they may prefer to organise for the other parent to give their gifts to the children on Christmas Day in their absence, and then speak to the children on the phone or on Skype.

Examples of arrangements that might work for your family

5. No special arrangements for Christmas.

For some families, Christmas Day is not something they want to make special arrangements for, and instead they just stick to their existing holiday arrangements (which might be half holidays with each parent, alternating weeks, majority with one parent, etc).

This suits families who are not particularly concerned with Christmas as a tradition (or are happy to celebrate it on another day), families who have different beliefs/religions, parents who don't want to have multiple handovers during the holidays, or parents who live a significant distance apart.



Which arrangement is best?

The best arrangement is one that you and your co-parent agree is the best for your children. The previous examples are just a small sample of different arrangements that other parents have used.

Don't leave it to the last minute to choose an arrangement and don't assume you know what is happening during the holidays. Make sure you talk to your children's co-parent early, so that you are both on the same page and have a joint plan for Christmas and the holidays.

Allowing the children to Skype, FaceTime or call the other parent is always good for the children and the co-parent. It is never an easy time, and not how you saw Christmas being for your child/children, however you can make it the best possible experience and take the worry and stress away from the children, no matter what age your children are.





5 tips for looking after yourself this Christmas:

1. Plan something special to treat yourself or contact a friend and set a date, time and place to catch up outside of the Christmas rush.
2. If you are feeling lonely, volunteer to help serve Christmas Day lunch with a charitable organisation.
3. Attend community celebrations such as your local Carols by Candlelight.
4. Make a list of things you are thankful for and all of the positive things in your life.
5. Keep things simple and prepare in advance - slow and steady wins the race.

Making a Christmas Parenting Plan

Christmas Parenting Plans are useful for helping co-parents come to agreements regarding Christmas and holiday arrangements for the kids.

Coming up with an agreed plan can reduce conflict and stress, and make for a more enjoyable holiday period for both the co-parents and the kids.

Over the following three pages you'll find a Christmas Parenting Plan template that we recommend parents use - make sure that both parents have a copy of the plan



Our Christmas Parenting Plan

Parent 1 name: _____

Parent 2 name: _____

Child 1 name: _____ Age: _____

Child 2 name: _____ Age: _____

Child 3 name: _____ Age: _____

This plan reflects our mutual concern for the welfare of our children:

Our intention is that our children may enjoy a loving and supportive relationship with both parents.

We understand that if signed and dated by both parents, this document will be viewed as a Parenting Plan.

A Parenting Plan is not a Court Order. It is not legally binding but is admissible in court and a court will take it into account in making future parenting arrangements. If issues of a legal nature arise with this Parenting Plan we understand that we will need to seek independent legal advice.

This agreement is to be read in conjunction with any existing Court Orders or Parenting Plan, and may wholly or in part amend such Orders or Parenting Plan.

This plan has been made free from harassment, coercion, and duress.

It was agreed that:

Living Arrangements

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1							
Week 2							

Flexibility

1. Mum and Dad will try to be flexible with each other in their care arrangements for the children.
2. When requesting a change in arrangements from the other parent it is okay for that parent to say "NO". A brief explanation may be given but "NO" will be accepted.
3. The parent with the rostered care of the children will be responsible for finding suitable alternative care for the children if they request flexibility from the other parent and that parent is unable to assist.
4. They will offer each other first right of refusal to care for the children overnight or more subject to the flexibility agreements above.

Decision Making

1. Mum and Dad agree that they have equal shared parental responsibility for their children. This means they will discuss and agree on all major decisions regarding the long term care and welfare of the children and reach agreement before either parent takes any action. Major decisions apply to living arrangements, education, medical issues, interstate and overseas travel, religion etc.
 2. Day to day issues can be discussed between the parents and if agreement reached similar day to day routines and practices established in each household. If there is no agreement they will respect each others different parenting approaches.
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Communication

1. Mum and Dad will adopt a businesslike approach when communicating in the future.
2. The focus of their future communication will be the children and the children's needs.
3. They will respect each others personal privacy unless there is a personal issue that is having an impact on the children.
4. The tone of future communication will be:
 - Polite
 - Respectful
 - Free from abuse, demands or pressing buttons
5. Mum and Dad will communicate directly with each other and not use the children as messengers.
6. They will communicate by the following means:
 - Text message for simple matters, flagging meetings, phone calls or emails and acknowledging messages.
 - Phone calls or meetings at agreed times
 - Emails
 - Face to face meetings
7. At changeover Mum and Dad will acknowledge each other, say hello and only share non-conflicting information i.e. How the children are travelling.
8. Mum and Dad will not expose the children to adult issues and conflict.
9. Mum and Dad will clarify any issues of concern raised by the children with each other in a non-judgemental way before assuming the feedback from the children is correct.
10. Mum and Dad will give the children privacy during phone contact with the other parent. This means not putting these phone calls on speaker phone.
11. Mum and Dad will separate communication about the children from communication regarding property settlement or other personal issues.

Changing this Parenting Plan

1. Mum and Dad can make changes to this plan at any time by reaching mutual agreement.
2. Minor changes can be written up, signed and dated by both parents and attached to the plan.
3. A new plan can be written up and if signed and dated by both parents replace the existing plan. In the first instance Mum and Dad will try to make any changes to the plan themselves. If this is unsuccessful they will contact the Family Relationship Centre for assistance.

Parent 1 name: _____

Parent 2 name: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

Useful Contacts

Shepparton Family Relationship Centre (Bendigo Office) (03) 5438 1300

Family Relationship Advice Line 1800 050 321

LifeLine Australia | www.lifeline.org.au 13 11 14

Mensline | mensline.org.au 1300 78 99 78

Centrelink | www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/centrelink 13 62 40

Child Support | www.servicesaustralia.gov.au 131 272



Co-parenting tips for communicating with your former partner

It all begins with your mindset. Think about communication with your former partner as having the highest purpose: your child's wellbeing.

Peaceful, consistent, and purposeful communication with your former partner is essential to the success of co-parenting, even though it may seem absolutely impossible.

Before contact with your former partner, ask yourself how your talk will affect your child, and resolve to conduct yourself with dignity. Make your child the focal point of every discussion you have with your former partner.

Communication with your former partner is likely to be a tough task. Remember that it isn't always necessary to meet your former partner in person, speaking over the phone or exchanging texts or emails is fine for the majority of conversations.

The goal is to establish conflict-free communication, so see which type of contact works best for you. Whether talking via email, phone, or in person, the following methods can help you initiate and maintain effective communication.

Set a business-like tone

Approach the relationship with your former partner as a business partnership where your "business" is your children's wellbeing. Speak or write to your former partner as you would a colleague with cordiality, respect, and neutrality. Relax and talk slowly.

Make requests instead of making statements

These can be misinterpreted as demands, try framing as much as you can as requests. Requests can begin "Would you be willing to...?" or "Can we try...?"

Listen

Communicating with maturity starts with listening. Even if you end up disagreeing with the other parent, you should at least be able to convey to your former partner that you've understood his or her point of view. And listening does not signify approval, so you won't lose anything by allowing your former partner to voice his or her opinions.



Show restraint

Keep in mind that communicating with one another is going to be necessary for the length of your children's entire childhood, if not longer. You can train yourself to not overreact to your former partner, and over time you can become numb to the buttons he or she tries to push.

Commit to meeting/talking consistently

Frequent communication with your former partner will convey the message to your children that you and their other parent are a united front. This may be extremely difficult in the early stages of your divorce or separation.

Keep conversations kid-focused

You can control the content of your communication. Never let a discussion with your former partner digress into a conversation about your needs or his/her needs; it should always be about your child's needs only.

Improving the relationship with your former partner

If you are truly ready to rebuild trust after a separation or divorce, be sincere about your efforts. Remember your children's best interests as you move forward to improve your relationship.

Ask his or her opinion

This fairly simple technique can effectively jump start positive communications between you and your former partner. Take an issue that you don't feel strongly about, and ask for your former partners input, showing that you value his or her input.

Apologise

When you're sorry about something, take the time to apologise sincerely, even if the incident happened a long time ago. Apologising can be very powerful in moving your relationship away from being adversaries.

Major decisions need to be made by both you and your former partner, being open, honest, and straightforward about important issues is crucial to both your relationship with your former partner and your children's wellbeing.

Discipline

Try to follow similar systems of consequences for broken rules, even if the infraction didn't happen under your roof. So, if your kids have lost TV privileges while at your former partner's house, follow through with the restriction. The same can be done for rewarding good behaviour.

Rules

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

Chill out

If a special outing with your former partner is going to cut into your time with your child by an hour, graciously let it be. Remember that it's all about what is best for your child; plus, when you show flexibility, your former partner is more likely to be flexible with you.

Schedule

Where you can, aim for some consistency in your children's schedules. Making meals, homework, and bedtimes similar can go a long way toward your child's adjustment to having two homes.

Medical needs

Effective co-parenting can help parents focus on the best medical care for the child, and can help reduce anxiety for everyone. Whether you decide to designate one parent to communicate primarily with health care professionals or attend medical appointments together, keep one another in the loop.

Education

School plays a major role in maintaining a stable environment for your kids, so be sure to let them know about changes in your child's living situation. Speak with your former partner ahead of time about class schedules, extra-curricular activities, and parent-teacher conferences, and be polite to him or her at school or sports events.

Financial issues

The cost of maintaining two separate households can strain your attempts to be effective co-parents. Set a realistic budget and keep accurate records shared expenses. Be gracious if your former partner provides opportunities for your children that you cannot provide.

Disagreements

As you co-parent, you and your former partner are bound to disagree over certain issues. Keep the following in mind as you try to come to consensus with your former partner.

Respect can go a long way

Simple manners are often neglected between co-parents, even though they should be the foundation for co-parenting. Being considerate and respectful includes letting your former partner know about school events, being flexible about your schedule when possible, and taking his or her opinion seriously.

Keep talking

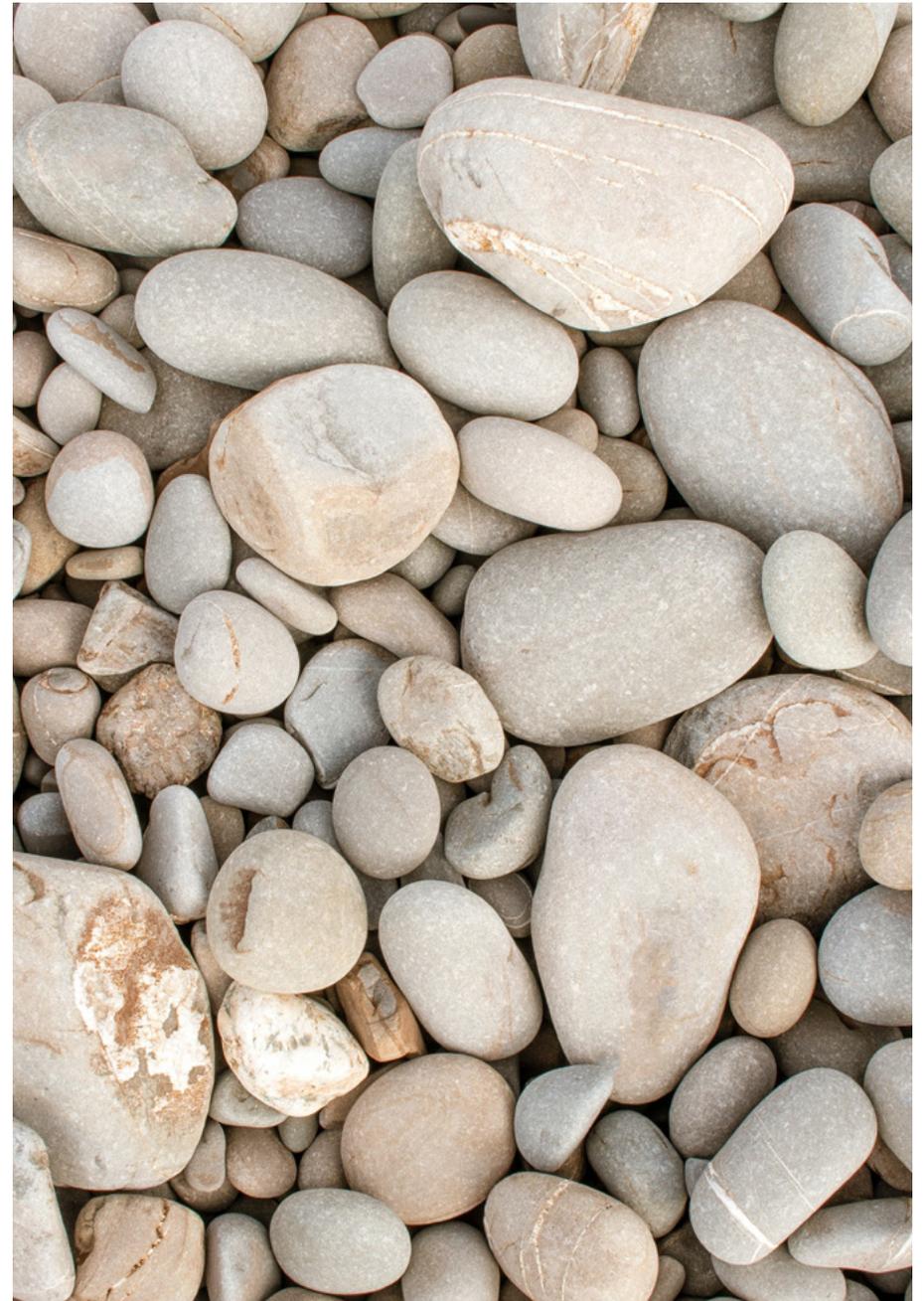
It might sound tedious, but if you disagree about something important, you will need to continue to communicate about the topic. Never discuss your differences of opinions with or in front of your child. If you still can't agree, you may need to talk to a third party, like a therapist or mediator.

Don't sweat the small stuff

If you disagree about important issues like a medical surgery or choice of school for your child, by all means keep the discussions going. But if you want your child in bed by 7:30 and your former partner says 8:00, try to let it go and save your energy for the bigger issues.

Compromise

Yes, you will need to come around to your former partner's point of view as often as he or she comes around to yours. It may not always be your first choice, but compromise allows you both to "win" and makes both of you more likely to be flexible in the future.



Making transitions easier

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. Transitions represent a major change in your children's reality.

Every reunion with one parent is also a separation with the other; each "hello" is also a "goodbye." In shared care arrangements, transition time is inevitable, but there are many things you can do to help make exchanges and transitions easier, both when your children leave and return.

When your child leaves

As kids prepare to leave your house for your former partner, try to stay positive and deliver them on time. You can use the following strategies to help make transitions easier:

Help children anticipate change

Remind kids they'll be leaving for the other parent's house a day or two before the visit.

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 drop off never pick up the child on "switch day."

It's a good idea to avoid "taking" your child from the other parent so that you don't risk interrupting or curtailing a special moment. Drop off your child at the other parent's house instead.

When your child returns

The beginning of your children's return to your home can be awkward or even rocky. You can try the following to help your child adjust:

Keep things low-key

When children first enter your home, try to have some down time together read a book or do some other quiet activity.

Double up

To make packing simpler and make kids feel more comfortable when they are at the other parent's house, have kids keep certain basics, toothbrush, hairbrush, pyjamas at both houses.

Allow the child space

Children often need a little time to adjust to the transition. If they seem to need some space, do something else nearby. In time, things will get back to normal.

Establish a special routine

Play a game or serve the same special meal each time your child returns. Kids thrive on routine, if they know exactly what to expect when they return to you it can help the transition.

Dealing with visitation refusal

Sometimes kids refuse to leave one parent to be with the other. Although this can be a difficult situation, it is also common for children in shared care.

Find the cause

The problem may be one that is easy to resolve, like paying more attention to your child, making a change in discipline style, or having more toys or other entertainment. Or it may be that an emotional reason is at hand, such as conflict or misunderstanding. Talk to your child about his or her refusal.

Go with the flow

Whether you have detected the reason for the refusal or not, try to give your child the space and time that he or she obviously needs. It may have nothing to do with you at all. And take heart: most cases of visitation refusal are temporary.

Talk to your former partner

A heart-to-heart with your former partner about the refusal may be challenging and emotional, but can help you figure out what the problem is. Try to be sensitive and understanding to your former partner as you discuss this touchy subject.



Setting hurt and anger aside

The key to co-parenting is to focus on your children and your children only. Yes, this can be very difficult. It means that your own emotions, any anger, resentment, or hurt must take a back seat to the needs of your children.

Co-parenting is not about your feelings, or those of your former partner, but rather about your child's happiness, stability, and future wellbeing.

Separating feelings from behaviour

It's okay to be hurt and angry, but your feelings don't have to dictate your behaviour. Instead, let what's best for your kids, you working cooperatively with the other parent motivate your actions.

Get your feelings out somewhere else

Never vent to your child. Friends, therapists, or even a loving pet can all make good listeners. Exercise can also be a healthy outlet for letting off steam.

Stay kid-focused

If you feel angry or resentful, try to remember why you need to act with purpose and grace: your child's best interests are at stake. If your anger feels overwhelming, looking at a photograph of your child may help you calm down.

Use your body

Consciously putting your shoulders down, breathing evenly and deeply, and standing erect can keep you distracted from your anger, and can have a relaxing effect.

Children in the middle

You may never completely lose all of your resentment or bitterness about your break up, but what you can do is compartmentalise those feelings and remind yourself that they are your issues, not your child's. Resolve to keep your issues with your former partner away from your children.

Never use kids as messengers

When you have your child tell the other parent something for you, it puts him or her in the centre of your conflict. The goal is to keep your child out of your relationship issues, so call or email your former partner yourself.

Keep your issues to yourself

Never say negative things about your former partner to your children, or make them feel like they have to choose. Your child has a right to a relationship with his or her other parent that is free of your influence.

Relieving stress in the moment, no matter who you're dealing with

It may seem impossible to stay calm when dealing with a difficult former partner who's hurt you in the past or has a real knack for pushing your buttons. But by practicing quick stress relief techniques, you can learn to stay in control when the pressure builds.

Parenting after Separation services

Our Family Relationship Centre team can provide support including:

- Helping you to build and strengthen existing relationships
- Early intervention and prevention services
- Child-friendly services for families in conflict, such as family dispute resolution services
- Building parenting plans that are fair and suitable for all involved
- Re-partnering and step-family arrangements
- Child-focused workshops, and information and referrals.

The Shepparton Family Relationship Centre (FRC) offers a range of services and programs, which are aimed at families at different stages of their life, including people starting relationships, those wanting to make their relationship stronger, those having relationship difficulties and those affected when families separate. Our FRC team encourages separating parents to focus strongly on the needs of their children.

The Shepparton FRC offers individual and joint sessions to assist separating families to create workable parenting arrangements for their children. We also offer group information sessions and educational programs on a range of topics to assist families.

Our FRC team works collaboratively with, and provides referrals to, a variety of other services, matching the needs of families we meet with or individuals to appropriate services.



An Australian Government Initiative

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68 Wyndham Street, Shepparton 3630
PO Box 444 Shepparton VIC 3632
T (03) 5820 0444



CatholicCare Victoria, Bendigo Office
176-178 McCrae Street, Bendigo 3550
PO Box 255 Bendigo VIC 3552
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