

Making The Most Of Parenting Time

OBJECTIVES:

1. Describe the relationship between child support and parenting time.
2. Identify the barriers to parenting time.
3. Discuss a plan for negotiating parenting time.

ITEMS NEEDED FOR THIS EDUCATIONAL SESSION:

- Handout materials for participant workbooks
- Flipcharts and markers
- Scrapbooking materials
- Pens and pencils

HANDOUTS:

1. *Case Study, Part A: Maria*
2. *Case Study, Part B: Felix*
3. *Assessing Our Co-Parenting Relationship*
4. *Our Parenting Agreement*
5. *Take Home Message for This Session*

GETTING STARTED

Review the information and homework from the previous session. If the last session was the one on barriers to child support, ask the participants to share their experiences with taking two steps to overcome the barriers to child support.

In today's session, we're going to discuss an important topic related to child support. It is called "parenting time" in which the non-custodial parent has regular visits with his/her children. We used to call it "visitation." Parenting time is such an important issue that the State of Michigan has guidelines available for parents to use in planning it.

ACTIVITY: Felix and Maria

Divide the class into two groups. One group will be assigned to read Maria's story and one Felix's story.

Felix and Maria are the parents of a ten-month old baby boy named Juan. They are not married, living together, or romantically involved with each other anymore. When Juan was first born, Felix visited Maria almost everyday and helped out with taking care of Juan and paid for his support. However, in the last few months, Felix has stopped coming over and paying for part of Juan's support. In your groups, read through the case study you have been given and discuss the questions at the end of the case study.

After the groups have had sufficient time to discuss the case studies, have each group share their answers to the questions of the case study.

Discuss:

- Child support is an important resource for families.
- A child needs to have both of their parents involved in his or her lives.

- Paying child support can either encourage or discourage parenting time.
- Sometimes when the non-custodial parent cannot pay, he or she stays away from his or her child. Even if a parent cannot pay, it is important that he or she maintains parenting time.
- If a parent is not able to pay child support, he or she may need to get job training and employment counseling.

ACTIVITY: Planning Parenting Time

Write the questions on a flip chart and put on a PowerPoint presentation.

Let's look at how Felix and Maria can begin to develop a parenting plan. On the flipchart is a list of questions to ask as they begin to work on a parenting plan. As a group, let's assess how easy or difficult it will be for Felix and Maria to come up with a plan for parenting time.

Assessing Felix and Maria's Co-Parenting Relationship

What kind of relationship do Felix and Maria have?

- _____ Cooperative.
- _____ Mostly cooperative with occasional conflict.
- _____ High-conflict. (Strong feelings from one or the other or both about almost everything.)

How easy will it be for Felix and Maria to come to a parenting plan?

- _____ It'll be easy.
- _____ It'll be somewhat difficult.
- _____ It'll be a long and difficult process.



Do you see Felix seeking equal parenting, more involvement, or less?

_____ Equal parenting with Maria

_____ More parenting than Maria

_____ Less parenting than Maria

Do you see Maria allowing Felix equal parenting, more involvement, or less?

_____ Equal parenting with Felix

_____ More parenting than Felix

_____ Less parenting than Felix

How willing do you think Felix will be to take on more than what you see as equal?
(5 is very happy.)

1 2 3 4 5

How willing do you think Maria is to equally share parenting with Felix? (5 is very happy.)

1 2 3 4 5

Discussion:

- Is it realistic to think that Felix will contribute more than Maria in parenting Juan? Why or why not?
- What effect will their level of conflict have on their ability to create a parenting plan?
- What steps can Maria take to encourage Felix to devote more time to parenting? Where can she get him involved with her son?
- At what point will Maria and Felix need assistance from an outside person to help them plan parenting time?

Now let's consider your own situation; how would you answer these same questions? [Have each participant complete the handout: **Assessing**

Our Co-Parenting Relationship.] How would your other child's parent complete the assessment? Note his or her answers next to yours.

Discuss:

- How does your level of conflict compare to Felix and Maria's conflict level?
- How has your level of conflict with your child's other parent affected parenting time with your children?
- What conflict management skills that we've learned might be used to lower the level of conflict?
- How willing are you to give an equal share or more than your share of parenting time? How might being willing to do this impact the level of conflict with your child's other parent?

ACTIVITY: Developing A Plan For Parenting Time

There are specific things you want to think about when you develop a plan for parenting time. We have a handout for you that you can use in working with your child's other co-parent, called **Our Parenting Plan**. You do not need to use this specific handout, but it does provide a good guide for the issues to consider.

Go through the handout with the participants highlighting important issues to consider.

If you have the opportunity, set a time to discuss the handout with your child's other parent before the next session. If you have high levels of conflict, select only one or two of the questions to discuss that may be easy to resolve. Also, don't be overwhelmed by the plan. It is meant only to be a guide for you. Also try to use the communication skills we learned in an earlier lesson.

ACTIVITY:
Workbook Page And Homework

Today's Workbook activity involves creating a page that reinforces the commitment of children's parents to positively resolve their differences and to work together to raise their children. Write a letter to your child's other parent telling him/her the importance of working together to raise your children. Describe how you would like him/her to provide both financial and emotional support to you and your child. Then design a workbook page on which to mount the letter

Give participant the take-home message for this session and have them write down their action steps on the take-home message. Remind them to place the take-home message in the magnetic frame.

CLOSING:

It is important for the non-custodial parent to have "Parenting time" with his/her child(ren). Parenting time is just as important as paying child support. But sometimes, like child support, it is difficult for co-parents to negotiate parenting time. We learned the importance of parenting time today and gave you some tools to negotiate it.



Case Study, Part A: Maria

Deciding on Parenting Time for Felix

Maria is trying to make some difficult decisions about parenting time for her baby's father. Here is Maria's story:

Maria's son, Juan, is ten months old and looks just like his dad, Felix. She says that he has Felix's personality, too. According to Maria, "Just like his dad, Juan can be very stubborn and then turn around and take my breath away with his smile."

Juan's father has not been around very much the last month or so. Maria says, "At first Felix was always providing for his son, like buying diapers, clothes, and baby food. But recently he has not been very helpful." Maria is trying to decide if she should go and file for child support. She knows the money would be good for her son, but she is not sure that she wants to get the authorities on Felix's back like that. Also, Maria thinks that a formal child support order would tie her to Juan's dad for a long time to come.

Maria is disappointed that Felix has not been able to keep a steady, good-paying job. His jobs have been seasonal, part-time jobs. She is proud of the fact that Felix has not been in trouble with the law. He has never "done drugs" or gotten involved with illegal activities.

Maria says that she sort of wishes that Felix would be more responsible about coming over to see his son. Juan loves to see his dad. Maria says, "He brightens right up as soon as his dad walks through the door. It is really something to see them play together. Felix swings Juan up into the air and they will both laugh and laugh." Also, Maria worries that Juan needs "a man" to be an example in his life. Maria says that, "Right now the only people in Juan's life are his grandmother, aunt, and I."

- What would be the benefits of encouraging Felix to be more involved in his son's life?
- What is keeping Felix from getting involved with Juan?
- Do you think that Maria should contact child support enforcement? Why or why not?

Case Study, Part B: Felix

Deciding on Parenting Time

Felix is trying to make some tough decisions on how much he should be involved in his baby's life. Here is Felix's story.

Felix's son is ten months old and, according to the baby's mother, "He is the spitting image of me." "He has my personality, too." "He's all boy. He has his own ideas about how things should be done and a big temper to go along with it!"

Felix says that, "Since my son was born, it seems like I take things more seriously. Having a son has changed my life. Now I have someone to live for. I also know that I have someone that will carry on my family name."

"I just wish I could do more for my son. It seems like the only jobs I can find are seasonal, part-time jobs. At first I was able to provide for my son by buying his formula and diapers, but things have been tough lately so I haven't been able to buy him very much. I have not been around to see him these last few weeks because I can't afford to buy him anything."

"I know Maria is threatening to file for child support. That would be hard on me because my income has not been

very steady. Besides, I like to know where my money is going. I would rather just buy the stuff, than hand over the cash."

"I love the times that my son and I spend together. We have a great time playing together. Besides, he needs a man's influence on his life. Right now he has all women raising him."

"I just wish that I had some way to get a good job. It seems like all the programs are set up to hurt fathers. None of them seem to be there to help us support our kids."

- What barriers keep Felix from spending more time with his son?
- What advice would you give Felix about being involved in his son's life?
- Do you think it is okay for Felix to have parenting time with Juan even if he cannot provide financial support?



Assessing Our Co-Parenting Relationship

What kind of relationship do you have with your child's other parent?

- Cooperative.
- Mostly cooperative with occasional conflict.
- High-conflict. (Strong feelings from one or the other or both about almost everything.)

How willing are you to take on more than what you see as equal?

(5 is very happy.)

1 2 3 4 5

What is your expectation of how easy it will be to come to a parenting plan?

- It'll be easy.
- It'll be somewhat difficult.
- It'll be a long and difficult process.

How willing are you to take less than what you see as equal?

(5 is very happy.)

1 2 3 4 5

Do you see yourself seeking equal parenting, more involvement, or less?

- Equal parenting with my child's other parent
- More parenting than my child's other co-parent
- Less parenting than my child's other co-parent

Our Parenting Agreement

This agreement is written for our child:

Name Age Birthday.....

I also have these other children:

Name Age Birthday.....

Name Age Birthday.....

Name Age Birthday.....

Name Age Birthday.....

I have chosen to (check all that apply):

- Stay romantically involved with my baby's father or mother and possibly marry my baby's father or mother.
- Co-parent with my baby's father or mother, but not stay involved romantically or marry him or her.
- Find another person who can act like a father or mother for my baby instead of my child's other parent.

PARENTING TIME

We commit to working together to raise our child. We will share the care of our baby. We will make decisions together about our baby's care, education, and welfare, now and in the future. (Refer to the **Child Care Tasks** handout.)

I, _____, am the baby's mother and give the following kind of care to my children:

.....

.....

.....



Our Parenting Agreement

I, _____, am the baby's father /mother (circle one) and give the following kind of care to my children:

.....

.....

.....

MAKING DECISIONS

We will make decisions together about:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> what school our child will attend | <input type="checkbox"/> how we will spend holidays, birthdays and other special days |
| <input type="checkbox"/> needed health care, including mental health care | <input type="checkbox"/> what religion we will be and where we will worship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> needed dental care | <input type="checkbox"/> other, please describe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> who will provide child care for our baby | |

SOLVING PROBLEMS

Sometimes we will not agree on important issues. When we disagree, we will:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> meet in a quiet place where we can be alone | <input type="checkbox"/> work only on one or two issues each time we meet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> talk to each other in a respectful way | <input type="checkbox"/> discuss issues about money and issues about parenting at separate meetings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> decide at the beginning of the meeting what we will talk about | <input type="checkbox"/> work hard to resolve our differences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> stick to the things we decided to talk about | |

Our child may have a problem in school, get sick, or get in trouble with the law. If possible, we will go together to talk to the police, doctors, or teachers. If one of us can't make it, the other will tell the other parent what happened. He or she will also involve the other parent.

Our Parenting Agreement

If at anytime we cannot solve our problems, we will find another person to help us. This person will be someone who will “not take sides.”

EXPENSES FOR OUR CHILD

Both parents are responsible for providing support for their child. Child support needs to cover: food, shelter, clothing, education and medical care. If the baby’s father or mother does not live with your child, list four ways that this parent agrees to provide for your child now and in the future:

- 1).....
- 2).....
- 3).....
- 4).....

To be certain that you can meet your children’s needs for the next 18 years, list four steps you and/or your baby’s other parent can take:

- 1).....
- 2).....
- 3).....
- 4).....

MAKING CHANGES TO YOUR PLAN

Once a year we will look at our parenting plan and decide if any changes need to be made. We agree to follow these steps to make changes to our plan:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> meet in a quiet place to talk about the changes. | <input type="checkbox"/> discuss changes related to money and parenting tasks at separate meetings. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> talk to each other in a respectful way. | <input type="checkbox"/> work hard to resolve any differences we have. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> work together to identify what needs to be changed and what can stay the same. | |

Adapted from: Spengler, L. (2001). *Developing a Parenting Plan: A Guide for Divorcing Parents*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Extension.

Take Home Message for This Session

Directions: Think of one step you will take before the next session and write it down in the space provided. In addition, write down the time, date, and location of the next session.

**A plan for parenting
time will ensure
parental involvement.**

My Action Steps:

.....
.....

The Next Session:

.....
DATE

.....
TIME

.....
LOCATION

