



What is Shared Parenting?

A definition by *Families Need Fathers*

There is much discussion of terminology for the involvement of both parents in the lives of their children; 'shared parenting', 'equal parenting', 'involved parenting', 'co-operative parenting', 'parallel parenting' and others.

The term preferred by FNF is shared parenting.

Unlike some of the others, it literally implies that both parents must share this role. This is not to say, for example, that co-operation should not be earnestly sought, or that equality is not a desirable long-term objective.

What do we mean by 'shared parenting'?

It does not imply a stated or fixed proportion of parenting time being allocated to a parent.

There must, however, be a proportion of parenting time that is so low that parenting can scarcely be said to be 'shared'. One could argue about at what level this is applied. What seems to be the 'standard ration' that children are offered - a fortnightly visit to their non-resident parent, plus some time around holidays - cannot be said to be shared parenting. Nor can parents with so little parenting time be effectively involved in any decisions that need to be taken.

Our definition revolves around the *objectives to be achieved*.

These are as follows:

- 1) That the children feel that they have two properly involved parents.

- 2) That one parent is not able to dominate the lives of the children at the expense of the other or to control the other parent via the children.
- 3) That the parents have broadly equal 'moral authority' in the eyes of the children and that the children have free access to both their parents if there are issues affecting them.
- 4) That the children are able to share the lives of both their parents 'in the round' - for example not spending all 'routine time' with one parent and only 'leisure time' with the other.
- 5) That the parents are in a position of legal and moral equality, and are considered in this light by the children as well as friends, neighbours, teachers etc and public authorities, over routine as well as major matters.
- 6) That there is no part of the children's lives - for example their school life or their friends - that one parent is excluded from by virtue of the allocation of parenting time.
- 7) That there is no part of the parent's life that the children are, by virtue of the allocation of parenting time, excluded from.
- 8) That the children spend enough time with both parents to be able to negate any attempts at 'parental alienation' with their own direct experience of the 'victimised' parent.
- 9) That the children do not develop stereotyped ideas from their parents about the roles of the sexes, for example that a father's role is chiefly financial and a 'giver of treats', and that mothers have responsibility for everything else.

How to apply these criteria to particular families will be a matter of discussion and negotiation, taking into account the individual needs and wishes of the children and parents and the circumstances in question.

Below are suggestions on how to proceed in the necessary direction:

- 1) That week-end contact begins with picking up the child(ren) from school/nursery on Friday and continues to delivering them on Monday. This will increase equality of parenting time, allow sufficient time for real shared activities and bonding, allow contact between the NRP and the school and other parents and their children (which are likely to be their own children's friends). In the event of concerns about the parents meeting each other, it will reduce the need for this.
- 2) That there be mid-week contact, normally picking up the child from school/nursery, and if practical the child staying overnight. This will

increase the range of activities that the children share with both parents. It is important, for example, that both parents are involved in homework.

3) That both parents share, preferably equally, attending to the children in any craft or leisure activities - for example children's parties – in which they are involved.

4) That 'half the holidays' be interpreted as half the time school children are not at school rather than half the time the works are shut. It should include half school training days, half of other holidays and festival days - if the parents cannot both be involved. The lives of babies and children too young to go to school are less constrained. Shared parenting will often mean a more equal allocation of parenting time than is possible for older children.

5) That special days - for example Christmas or other festival holidays, the children's and their siblings' birthdays - be equally shared if the parents cannot be together for them. That the children also be allowed to be with the relevant parent for days that are special for that parent - for example their birthdays and those of their grandparents, or for other festivals and important events. Examples are work's Open Days and sports fixtures (for both the children and the parents), Mothers' Day with their mothers and Fathers' Day with their fathers.

6) That the children are not put into daycare, after school clubs, babysat or other alternatives to parental care, if one of their parents is available to look after them.

7) If the residential parent has a life (for example long hours of work) that restricts their availability for parenting, they should not be allowed to claim priority in the time they have available.

8) Time for the children to see their grandparents and wider family - on both sides of the family - must be adequate.

We acknowledge that there is older research which shows that what benefits children is not the 'quantity' of contact, but its 'quality'. This finding is sometimes abused to argue that quantity is not important. In fact more recent research¹ shows that both quantity and quality is important. Quantity of parenting time is obviously not a sufficient condition of quality, and this *applies to the 'residential' parent as well as the other*, but to quote the sociologist, social reformer and theologian Amatai Etzione:²

¹ Dunn J and others (2004) *Children's perspectives on the Relationship with their non-Resident Fathers* Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry Vol 45 No 3.

² As far as we are aware this point has not been checked out: that different sorts and levels of contact might meet different needs. For example, the child's need for a 'full identity' might be met by having modest amounts of contact, but for him or her to have support in schooling, for example, might require more. If this were the case, different tests would produce different results.

Quality time is found within quantity time. It may be possible to be a one-minute manager, but one cannot be a one-minute parent.

Lack of sufficient quantity time is a barrier to quality time. One parent is not around, for example, when something important happens, needs doing or talking about.

We find the research by Liz Trinder and others that contact works best where there is a 'gender contract', highly problematic. According to this, the mother supports contact and in return the father acknowledges his inferior status as a parent. As a child-centred organisation we recommend individual parents to do whatever is needed to promote the best outcomes for their children. If getting a proper relationship with our children requires us to bow to the residential parent we will do so, but wholly cynically and for the sake of the children.

Trinder's research may well describe current attitudes correctly. However, we are bound to struggle in every setting - except where our children will be punished for it - against being regarded as second class parents.

Imagine the ideological and research situation was reversed, for example over domestic violence, and male supremacists were supported in researching it and making recommendations. They might find that the 'research' supported the idea that domestic violence was less prevalent if females were sufficiently submissive. They might suggest a corresponding 'gender contract'. Women's and equality lobbies would rightly find that unacceptable. As we do over parenting.

John Baker, FNF Chair