



PARENTING TO WIN:

7 Co-Parenting Tips for a Successful Relationship with Your Child



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Married or unmarried, parents have a fundamental right to raise their children. Arizona's legal decision-making and parenting time laws protect those parental rights equally for mothers and fathers, as well as the rights of all children to be supported and cared for.

Every moment spent with your son or daughter is an opportunity to strengthen the bonds between you. When child custody is disputed, a family law attorney must present your parenting decisions and judgments in the light most favorable to you. Doing so is essential to getting the relationship you desire with your child.

You and the other parent may be in agreement today, but disagreement over child-rearing can arise anytime. Always be prepared to validate and substantiate your parenting decisions.

As the child's Mom or Dad, you have rights and responsibilities. The extent to which you enjoy the former will depend greatly upon how well you accomplish the latter. In these pages, I'll explain how to begin carrying out those responsibilities in a meaningful way.

P.S. In Arizona law, the term "child custody" was replaced with legal decision-making and parenting time. For ease of discussion, child custody is occasionally used when referencing global issues in a general sense.

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1. THE BEST INTERESTS OF YOUR CHILD

You need to understand how the court goes about determining legal decision-making and parenting time, whether or not you were married to the other parent when your child was born. The court will review all information using the “best interests of the child” standard. That review extends to an examination into both parents’ actions, judgments, and statements regarding their child.

When you seek significant involvement with your child be ready to show you are committed to co-parenting, are fully prepared, and have a plan. One key factor in determining legal decision-making authority is the level of your participation in the child’s daily life. *See ARS 25-403.*

Maximize the value of your parenting time and stay involved, no matter how the case proceeds.

You must convince the Judge and Child Custody Evaluator of your having the requisite dedication, character, and responsible nature to be there as custodian for your child day-in and day-out. That you should be given equal or nearly equal access to your child for parenting time.

Hopefully your custody issues will be resolved amicably in your child’s best interests without the necessity of judicial scrutiny into your parental decisions and abilities. Still, you must prepare for that level of heightened examination anyway.

If you haven't been keeping a parenting journal to record your time and activities together, then start doing so today.

Access our Parenting Time Journal
from the attachments panel





2. DOCUMENT YOUR PARENTING TIME BY KEEPING A PARENTING JOURNAL

Conflicts over child custody are often emotionally charged and take months to resolve. Because these matters require full and accurate descriptions of parenting time, it is pivotal to your case that you be ready to reconstruct and substantiate your parenting time. You need to establish to the Judge your ability to care for your child. Find something to document your involvement in each and every aspect of child rearing (education, healthcare, daycare, religion, extracurricular activities, and so on).

A parent's failure to account accurately for parenting time in a child custody case can seriously damage his or her credibility. So this does not happen to you, carefully record events for future use in the case. Save formal and informal records, photographs, brochures, letters, receipts, mementos, tickets, and emails as evidence and to jog your memory when the pressure is on.

Begin keeping a parenting journal to calendar what is happening daily, weekly, and monthly regarding the child's activities while in your care.



INCLUDE:

- Communications with professionals, educators, counselors, daycare or healthcare providers (note what was discussed and with whom, list names, addresses, phone numbers, and email contacts)
- When you dropped-off and picked-up your child from daycare
- Daycare incident reports about your child's activities and behavior
- Information shared with the other parent regarding your child's educational, medical, extra-curricular, and religious activities
- Activities with your child, trips, special events and celebrations, ball games, and time spent with extended family
- Attendance at parent-teacher conferences and the points discussed
- Special educational events attended (music recitals, performing arts, science fairs, competitions)
- Doctor appointments, dental and optical visits, and child counseling sessions
- Communications with the other parent over concerns with parenting time exchanges or other issues
- Problems with telephone access when your child is with the other parent, not having your child return calls, eavesdropping, or not allowing the child sufficient privacy to speak freely
- Any obstruction of access to your child by the other parent or someone involved with the other parent
- Indications that the other parent may be discussing the custody case with your child or alienating you from your child

Never miss opportunities to collect evidence supporting your parenting abilities!



3. DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR CHILD CARE

Your parenting time should not involve dropping the child off at a friend's or family member's place so you are free to do something else. Unless that person operates a daycare facility from home, that is not a viable childcare plan. Instead, demonstrate your commitment to substantial parenting by preparing a detailed daycare plan to:

- *Properly care for the child while you are at work*
- *Establish how you will adjust your work schedule around the child's needs*
- *Show flexibility when additional or alternate childcare is needed*
- *Transport the child to activities and events*



As part of your plan, have the following daycare information at your fingertips:

- Name and contact information for the person in charge of the daycare facility
- Whether records are retained over your child's activities and behavior
- Whether you will be dropping the child off or picking the child up (or both)
- Any problems this facility is having now or has had in the past
- Estimated daycare costs

Also include a list of the important people in your child's life:

- Educators and school administrators
- Healthcare providers
- Counselors
- Religious and spiritual advisors
- Coaches and youth group leaders
- Your child's fellow team members
- Family members, friends, and neighbors



Be sure to include contact information, summaries, and job titles. Keep this information current!



4. MAKE YOUR HOME YOUR CHILD'S HOME

When parents break up there can be tremendous upheaval in the child's life. To feel secure and have some sense of control, children need structure, predictability, and a special place of their own in each parent's household. Establishing a normal routine of regular activities – homework, chores, and free unstructured time – is a great way to begin. But helping your child adapt to new living arrangements is best accomplished by doing everything you can to make your home your child's home.



Before selecting a new apartment, house, condo, or townhome, think about how you will integrate personal living space for your child.



Depending upon your accommodations and resources:

- Provide a separate bedroom, particularly for tweens and teens
- Provide a personal desk for study, especially when children share a bedroom
- Create a Kid's Zone in the family room, den, or Arizona room for the child's playthings, craft supplies, children's books, and pint-sized furniture



Think about ways to bring your child into the community.



Assist your child in establishing new relationships with neighboring children by:

- Visiting area parks and playgrounds with your child
- Attending informal social events as a family
- Involving your child with age appropriate extra-curricular activities through churches, schools, 4-H, and community youth programs





5. BE PREPARED TO MAXIMIZE YOUR PARENTING TIME

Parenting time is your opportunity to strengthen the relationship you have with your son or daughter. It's your chance to build a bond that will last a lifetime. With any parenting time schedule, there will be some restrictions on access so it's very important that you learn how to maximize the time you will have together.

Importantly, how you spend your parenting time will also be on display during the Child Custody Evaluator's interview. To establish your commitment to substantial child rearing, it is imperative that you engage in meaningful activities and are intentional with your parenting time.

Always strive to strike a balance between structured activities and unstructured free time.

- Schedule visits to the homes of extended family so your child develops positive relationships with relatives.



Combine indoor and outdoor activities into your parenting time.

- Plan to have fun, picnic at a park or recreation area, attend "story time" at the library. Join with neighbors and friends in these activities, too.
- Plan to share at least one special meal together, a simple ritual that always brings family together.

Learn to prioritize and make good time management decisions.



- Don't be quick to reschedule your parent-child activities (and free time) for something else that could be done another day. Avoid working while your child watches TV or plays video games out of convenience. Your time is limited so make the most of it.



6. PARENTING TIME IS NOT DEPENDENT UPON TIMELY PAYMENT OF CHILD SUPPORT

Parenting time and the payment of child support are two distinctly separate legal matters. One is not dependent upon the other. First, because your child should never equate his or her value to you in terms of mere dollars and cents:

- **Never discuss child support with your child**
- **Never discuss child support with another adult in the presence of your child**



Parenting time is an essential component of the parenting plan. That plan includes terms and conditions governing how parents will handle after-school time, evenings, weekends, vacations, travel, parenting time exchanges, and communications. Should a parent violate the terms of the parenting plan by restricting access, a contempt order may be sought and appropriate legal action may be taken in defense of the child.

If one parent falls behind on child support payments, it would be misguided for the other parent to obstruct access in an attempt to enforce child support. The court will not condone withholding parenting time from a parent who is not paying timely support. Obstructing parenting time punishes the child for something he or she has no control over. It's an important emotional issue and a financial issue, but child support enforcement should only be handled through proper legal channels.





7. TAKE PRECAUTIONS TO PROTECT YOUR PRIVACY AND REPUTATION

With social networking so commonplace, collecting damaging evidence against a parent has become much easier. Be cautious, your online presence will be highly scrutinized during custody proceedings. Take extra care to protect your online privacy and reputation.

Cell phones, text messages, emails, blogs, online photographs, and tweets, all are potential sources of evidence which can be used for or against you. Parties and their attorneys routinely look to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and the like to gather information about the other parent.

Consider the legal ramifications of publishing anything personal and be discrete with all forms of social media.



Here are some useful tips for managing your online social presence:

- Think before you post
- When you must post a message, stick to the point and choose your words carefully
- Exercise restraint in posting any pictures of yourself (never post anything risqué)
- Do not boast or post photographs of expensive purchases and vacations
- Clean up your image and your page
- When friends have detrimental photos of you on their pages evidencing your questionable behavior and judgment, try to get those removed
- Never discuss the custody case, the judge, the other parent, or the attorneys
- Do not post anything that your child should not see
- Do not disparage the other parent or attempt to alienate that parent from your child
- Search for information about yourself on social networking websites to learn of your online vulnerabilities and share the details with your attorney
- Enable your privacy settings and set them high
- Consider logging off entirely until your custody case is resolved



Be mindful that what you post may be used against you as evidence in any family law case!



Stewart Law Group is here to help you successfully navigate your Arizona family law case. We know from experience how challenging child custody proceedings can be for parents, both legally and emotionally.

Our legal team provides the support and guidance our clients need so they can focus on what really matters – parenting their children.

Our represent mothers and fathers, divorcing parents, relocating parents, and unmarried parents on the full range of legal issues relating to legal decision-making and parenting time in Arizona law. We'd like to help you, too.



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ISBN 978-1-7323041-8-5