



Co-Parenting

HANDBOOK



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Many co-parenting relationships face some level of conflict as families adjust to their new two-household lifestyle. This handbook is designed to help parents who live apart work together, even when conflict arises.

In this handbook you will find tools you can use right away:

- Frequently asked questions about child custody and child support, including information about dispute resolution methods and emergency custody in North Carolina.
- Parenting plan insights, including example custody schedules.
- Co-parenting conversation scripts along with tips for effective communication and documentation practices.
- Documentation templates. Should the need arise to work with professionals - such as attorneys, therapists, or family mediators - being able to provide clear and organized records is a major advantage.
- Suggested resources and recommended reading.

The purpose of this guide is to promote healthy co-parenting relationships. If you feel unsafe or have safety concerns about the other parent at any point during your co-parenting experience contact your family law attorney and any other appropriate resources immediately.

This handbook is an educational resource and does not provide legal advice. If you need help navigating custody or co-parenting issues consult with an experienced family law attorney who understands the specifics of your case.

Frequently Asked Questions about **Child Support**

Child Support ensures that children receive the financial support they need from both parents. This FAQ provides clear answers to common questions about how Child Support works and what to do if problems arise.

Who can apply for child support in North Carolina?

Any custodial parent, guardian, or caretaker of a child can apply for child support. Noncustodial parents can also apply to establish child support orders.

How is the amount of child support determined?

North Carolina and South Carolina use a state-specific Child Support Guidelines. Said guidelines factor in both parents' incomes, the number of children, and child custody arrangements.

Can child support be modified?

Yes. Either parent can request a modification if there is a substantial change in financial circumstances, such as a job loss, change in physical custody, or change in the financial needs of the child.

Does child support cover health costs or childcare?

The court may order one or both parents to contribute to health insurance premiums, medical expenses, and childcare costs in addition to the base child support amount.

How long does child support last?

Child support typically continues until the child turns 18 or graduation from high school, whichever is later. However, there are exceptions.

What if the other parent does not pay?

Child support orders can be enforced through a variety of means including wage garnishment, tax refund interception, license suspension, contempt, and even jail.

What if the other parent lives in another state?

Child Support obligations remain enforceable even if the parents reside in different states. Child Support Enforcement or the local domestic courts can assist.

What if I have a joint custody arrangement?

Joint physical custody does not negate the need for child support, rather it is one of the factors in the child support calculation. One parent may still owe child support to the other parent, even with equal parenting time arrangements.

Frequently Asked Questions about **Child Custody**

When parents separate or divorce, one of the most important—and often most emotional—issues is determining custody of their children. The law prioritizes the best interests of the child, but the legal process can still feel overwhelming. This FAQ is designed to help parents, guardians, and caregivers understand how Child Custody works.

What types of Child Custody exist?

Custody is primarily categorized into two types: legal and physical. Both can be further divided into sole (one parent) or joint (shared by both parents) arrangements.

What is the difference between legal custody and physical custody?

Legal custody determines which parent has the ability to make major decisions about the child's welfare such as education decisions, healthcare, etc. Physical custody determines which parent physically has the child in their custody, when, and for how long in a scheduled manner.

How does the court decide who gets custody?

The court considers the best interests of the child - including factors such as each parents ability to care for the child, stability of each home, relationship between the child and each parent, history of domestic violence or substance abuse, and more.

Can grandparents or other relatives get visitation?

Yes. In certain unique cases a grandparent, relative, or other third party with a close relationship to the child can ask for visitation.

Is mediation required in child custody cases in North Carolina?

Yes, most custody cases require court-ordered mediation before going to trial. Rooted in the idea that parents are in a better position to know what is best for their children, mediation helps parents reach an agreement without a Judge's determinations.

Can custody orders be changed?

Yes. Either parent can request a modification if there is a significant change in circumstances, such as relocation or changes in the child's needs.

What if the other parent violates the child custody order?

There are a few options for enforcement, such as pursuing contempt or modification. The Judge may enforce the order through fines, changes to custody, or other penalties.

EMERGENCY CHILD CUSTODY IN NORTH CAROLINA



When your child is involved, everything feels urgent, but not every situation qualifies as a legal emergency. North Carolina law outlines specific criteria for when and how emergency custody can be an option.

What Is Emergency Custody?

Emergency custody is a temporary court order that grants sole custody of a child to one parent due to a specific emergency.

When Can I File for Emergency Custody?

You must meet the following:

- You have standing to file a custody claim.
- A custody case is already filed or filed alongside the emergency motion.
- The situation meets statutory emergency criteria with a threat to the child, such as:
 - Substantial risk of bodily injury or death,
 - Sexual abuse, or
 - Removal from North Carolina to avoid the court's jurisdiction.

Scenarios for an Emergency Child Custody Order:

- Threats or actual removal of the child from the state with the intent to avoid the jurisdiction of the Court.
- Evidence of actual abuse or threat of imminent harm or death to the child.

What Happens After Filing?

A Judge will decide if an ex parte order is appropriate. "Ex parte" refers to the situation where a Judge enters an emergency order without both parties present. An ex parte emergency custody order requires that it expire and a follow-up hearing be scheduled within 10 days. At the hearing, both parties are given the opportunity to be heard and present evidence.

At the hearing, the court will decide whether:

- The emergency still exists,
- The order should be extended, and/or
- If other relief is more appropriate, such as a Temporary Custody Order that provides parenting time to both parties.

Important Considerations:

Emergency custody is rare and should be pursued only when truly necessary. Filing without proper grounds can be costly and strategically risky.

Need Help?

If you believe your child is at risk, contact Modern Legal immediately. Our experienced family law attorneys will guide you through the process and protect your child's safety.



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DISPUTE RESOLUTION PATHWAYS

Every family is different, and so are the processes to resolve disputes. Learn about the 4 Key Legal Processes, and what to consider when deciding which path to take.

Litigation

Litigation is the traditional court process where a claim is filed with the Court. If no agreement can be reached, a judge makes final decisions based upon presented evidence to resolve issues like child custody, support, and property division. Each party can be represented by an attorney.

Benefits:

- **Structure & Enforcement:** Ideal for high-conflict cases or when one party is uncooperative.
- **Legal Precedent:** Attorneys and Judges can rely on statutes, caselaw, and other legal precedent.
- **Court authority:** Judges can step in when parties cannot agree.

Considerations:

- Court documents are generally public record.
- The process can take extensive money, time, and an emotional toll.
- Parties have limited control over the outcome.

Mediation

A voluntary, non-binding process where a neutral third party - mediator - helps parties reach a mutual agreement. The mediator facilitates discussion but does not have decision-making authority.

Key Benefits:

- **Efficiency:** Typically faster resolution.
- **Cost-effective:** Typically less expensive than litigation.
- **Confidential:** Discussions are private and not part of the public record.
- **Authority:** Final decision-making is preserved with the parties.

Considerations:

- **Final Resolution Not Guaranteed:** Requires both parties to participate in good faith, and to ultimately reach an agreement.
- An agreement only becomes legally binding once it is formalized in legal documents.

Arbitration

A private process where a neutral third party (the arbitrator) acts similar to a judge and makes legally-binding decisions. Both parties agree to arbitration and present their evidence to the arbitrator. The arbitrator issues a decision (called an "award") that is typically approved by a Judge to ensure enforcement similar to a Judge's order.

Benefits:

- **Efficiency:** Faster Resolution with a 'chosen' Arbitrator.
- **Privacy:** Proceedings are confidential, except for any court documents filed with the Court.
- **Flexibility:** Scheduling and procedures are more adaptable than Court.

Considerations:

- **Binding decisions:** Limited or no right to appeal.
- **Cost:** You pay for the arbitrator's time.

Collaborative

A team-based approach where both parties and their attorneys commit to resolving issues without going to court. Everyone signs a participation agreement in which 'guardrails' are established. If the process fails, both attorneys must withdraw and new counsel must be hired for litigation.

Benefits:

- **Holistic support:** Often includes third party professionals, such as divorce coaches, financial advisors, and therapists.
- **Private & respectful:** Encourages open communication and long-term cooperation.
- **Child-focused:** Especially beneficial in custody and parenting matters.

Considerations:

- **Not for everyone:** Requires a high level of trust and willingness to collaborate.
- **Start from scratch if it fails:** If the process breaks down, you must start over with new attorneys.

Key Considerations for Crafting a Parenting Plan

A well-crafted parenting plan lays the foundation for stability, cooperation, and clarity. These documents serve as a roadmap for how families will share responsibilities, make decisions, and support the wellbeing of children across households. While every situation is unique, taking time to think through key details helps reduce conflict, set consistent expectations, and creates a predictable environment where children can thrive.

This list highlights important considerations when building a plan that is practical, child-centered, and sustainable for your family:

- Decision-Making Protocol for joint legal custody: how to consult with each other & tie-breakers when deadlocked.
- Information sharing: timelines to upload school/medical documents.
- Child Exchange Protocol: location, curbside etiquette, and addressing a child's belongings.
- Medical & Therapy Needs: notice for non-emergencies & emergency notice timing.
- Travel & Relocation Notice: when to provide itineraries, emergency contacts for travel. Remember: Any significant residency relocations typically require consent of the other parent and/or court order modification.
- School Records (FERPA): custodial and non-custodial parents generally have equal rights of access to education records.
- Right of First Refusal: when one parent cannot personally care for the child for their defined parenting period, they are required to first offer the time to the other parent, prior to engaging childcare services or contacting a third party. Although many Courts do not automatically include said right into a child custody order, parents may find this right useful in their situation.

Creating a Child Custody Schedule:

- Even the most detailed schedule will need adjustments. Calendar adjustments should be agreed to in writing from both parents. For long term changes, talk with your attorney about modifying your current arrangement.
- Make sure your calendar considers any personal commitments, your child's school schedule, or your child's extracurricular activity schedule.
- Outline a holiday & special-day schedule. Will you alternate odd/even years for major holidays and school breaks? What will the exchange details look like? What is a major holiday or break for your child?

Example Custody Schedules

While every family is different, these sample custody calendars are a few of the most common schedule rotations between two parents.

**Week-on, Week-off
(Exchange on Friday)**

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			01	02	03	04
05	06	07	08	09	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

**Every Other Weekend (Friday
afternoon to Monday morning)**

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			01	02	03	04
05	06	07	08	09	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

**2-2-3 (Parents rotate
weekdays and weekends)**

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			01	02	03	04
05	06	07	08	09	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

Co-Parenting Communication and Documentation

Effective communication is essential. It is also important to document everything, especially if there is the possibility for any level of conflict or confusion.

Proper records & documentation help maintain accountability, avoid future obstacles, hopefully keep everyone out of Court. Clear records also provide clarity when memories differ or emotions run high, ensuring that decisions remain focused on the child's best interests, rather than misunderstandings or assumptions. Consistent documentation can also reduce stress by creating a predictable system for both parents to refer back to.

How do you effectively record, document, and communicate?

- There's an app for that! From Our Family Wizard to Google Calendar, there are a range of apps (both free and paid) to support any co-parenting need. These digital tools help streamline exchanges, provide time-stamped communication, and create shared access to schedules, messages, and essential documents.
- Co-parenting conversation scripts with examples that utilize BIFF (Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm) responses and EAR (Empathy, Attention, and Respect) statements. See resource page for more information.
- Included are example templates for:
 - Parenting time change requests
 - Documenting travel notice and itinerary information
 - Right of First Refusal offers
 - Suggested FERPA checklist for school communications

While these tools work best when both parents commit to using them, they are still helpful for documentation purposes for individual parent record keeping as well. Even when only one parent is consistently recording information, maintaining organized and factual notes can demonstrate reliability, reduce confusion, and serve as a protective measure in the event questions arise later. In time, these habits often create a more stable communication environment.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of successful coparenting. Whether you are navigating daily logistics, making decisions about your child's well-being, or handling moments of conflict, having a respectful and constructive dialogue can make all the difference. This guide offers practical, compassionate conversation starters and response suggestions to help parents communicate clearly, reduce tension, and stay focused on what matters most—the well-being of their children.



Coordinating Schedules and Transitions

- Use a joint digital calendar with detailed pickup assignments, or a co-parenting app such as Our Family Wizard.
- Check-in via text: "Hi, just checking in to confirm that you'll be picking up [CHILD] from [LOCATION] at [TIME] today. Let me know if anything changes so we can adjust accordingly. Thanks!"



When You're Asked to Change Plans Last-Minute

- Even if you are frustrated, keep your focus on your child's needs.
- "I will try to adjust my schedule."
- "If you would like to discuss schedule changes in the future, please provide written advance notice to avoid conflict and stress, especially for [CHILD]."



If Emotional Manipulation Occurs

- Deep breath. Remember, you are not in a romantic relationship with this person, but you do share a child together. Focus on their needs.
- "We may not agree on every decision, but I'm committed to making choices that are in [CHILD]'s best interest."



De-escalating a Spiraling Conversation and Creating a Pause Respectfully

- You can prioritize your child AND set boundaries.
- "I'm open to discussing [CHILD]'s needs when the conversation is respectful. Let's revisit this when we can communicate constructively."



Discussing School or Behavioral Concerns

- "Thanks for sharing your concerns about [CHILD] and what's been happening at school/home. I agree it's important we stay informed and work together to support [CHILD]. Let's check in with [CHILD]'s teacher or therapist."



Introducing New Partners

- Moving forward with new romantic interests is okay, but you must also do what is best for your child.
- "I'm committed to making decisions that support [CHILD]'s wellbeing, including introducing new partners. I'm open to a brief conversation or agreement on when to introduce new partners to [CHILD]."

Parenting Time Change Request

EXAMPLE TEMPLATE

Parent Submitting Request: _____

Other Parent: _____

Date Submitted: _____

Change Being Requested

Current Scheduled Parenting Time: _____

Requested New Date(s) and Time(s): _____

Is this a temporary, one-time change? Yes No

If recurring or longer-term, describe:

Reason for Request:

Give a brief, factual explanation:

Proposed Makeup Time

If applicable, list proposed time here:

Exchange Details

Preferred Exchange Location:

School

Parents Residence

Neutral Public Location

Other: _____

Transportation Plan:

Additional Notes:

Response Requested by: _____

For Responding Parent

Request is: Approved Denied Counter Proposal Date of Response: _____

Comments:

Right of First Refusal Offer

You can use this template to log each notice you send or receive. Keep entries factual, brief, and focused on the details of the childcare need and response.

Parent Offering Time: _____

Other Parent: _____

Date & Time Notice Sent: _____

Method of Notice: Co-parenting app Text Email Phone Call Other:

Reason Custodial Parent is Unavailable to Provide Care

Give a brief, factual explanation:

Start of Needed Care (Date and Time): _____

End of Needed Care (Date and Time): _____

Response Received from Other Parent:

Accepted

No response within required timeline

Declined

Date and Time Response Received: _____

Transportation Arrangement (if applicable):

Additional Notes:

Travel Notice & Itinerary

EXAMPLE TEMPLATE

Parent Providing Notice: _____

Other Parent: _____

Date Notice Provided: _____

Travel Dates: Departure: _____
Return: _____

Destination(s):

Include cities, states, countries as applicable

Purpose of Travel: Vacation Sports Activity/Event
 Family Visit Other:
 School Related Trip

Brief Description:

Lodging Information:

Primary Lodging Address: _____

Phone/Contact at Lodging: _____

If multiple locations, list additional addresses and phone numbers:

Transportation Arrangement: Car Plane Train Bus Other:

Airline/Flight Numbers: _____

Departure Location/Time: _____

Return Location/Time: _____

Vehicle Make/Model/License if driving: _____

Emergency Contacts:

Parent Traveling with Child: _____

Backup Adult Supervisor: _____

Additional Notes:

FERPA Checklist for School Communications

Parents can use this checklist to ensure they are receiving the school information they are entitled to under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and to keep educational communication organized between households.

Parent Access & Contact Information

- Confirm both parents (custodial and non-custodial) are listed with the school unless a court order specifically restricts one parent's access.
- Provide the school with a certified copy of any order that limits a parent's access and confirm the school has properly documented and flagged those restrictions.
- Provide the school with updated phone numbers, emails, and mailing addresses for each parent.
- Ask the school to send duplicate copies of report cards, behavior notices, and school announcements if needed.

Understanding Rights Under FERPA

- Remember both parents generally have the right to access and review educational records, unless a legally binding court order states otherwise.
- Keep copies of custody orders to share with the school if access restrictions apply.
- Request an explanation of what records qualify as "education records" (grades, attendance, disciplinary reports, IEP/504 documents, etc.).

Requesting Records

- Submit requests for school records in writing (email is acceptable).
- Clearly specify which records you need such as latest report card, attendance records, behavior notes.
- Keep a copy of each request and the school's response for your personal file.

School-Parent Communication Practices

- Request separate login accounts for online portals.
- Ask to be included on classroom communication platforms such as teacher newsletters, learning apps, and behavior trackers.
- Sign up for school-wide alerts, bus notifications, and emergency communication systems.

Sharing Information Between Co-Parents

- Upload school documents to your co-parenting app within 48 hours.
- Avoid relying on your child to relay messages between homes.
- Keep communications factual and child-focused when discussing education matters.

Advocacy and Problem Solving:

If you are not receiving records or communications, politely remind the school of FERPA parental access rights. If issues persists, set up a meeting with the school's administrator or principal. Keep notes of all conversations including dates, names, and outcomes.

Recommended Resources

A successful co-parenting relationship is easier to maintain when parents have easy access to clear, reliable tools and support. The resources below serve as a quick guide to help households stay informed, organized, and focused on what matters most.

Emergency and Safety:

- Immediate Emergency: 911
- Suicide Prevention/Mental Health Crisis Line: 988
- Child Protective Services: 980-31-HELPS (43577)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-7233
- Greater Charlotte Hopeline (Safe Alliance - Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and Human Trafficking): 980-771-4673
- NAMI: 704-333-8218 (Charlotte - Local)/ 800-950-6264 (National)
- The Relatives Hotline (for youth & teens): 704-377-0602

There's an app for that:

- Our Family Wizard provides a full suite of co-parenting tools
- Shared Family Calendars, such as Google Calendar
- Cozi is a family organizer app that helps manage schedules, tasks and more

Online Resources:

- ModernLegalNC.com - Family Law Resources
- ModernLegalMediation.com - Mediation Resources
- NCCourts.gov - Judicial resources

Recommended Reading:

- [BIFF for Coparents](#) - Bill Eddy (with Annette Burns, Kevin Chafin)
- [Mom's House, Dad's House](#) - Isolina Ricci, Ph.D.
- [The Co-Parenting Handbook](#) - Karen Bonnell

Insightful Podcasts:

- Legal Lounge
- Co-Parenting Beyond Conflict
- Coparent Academy
- Raising Good Humans

Other Professionals can provide valuable insight and support. This includes therapists, parenting coaches, parenting coordinators, and mediators.

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