K. Readiness for Co-Parenting Assessment Guide

This guide is designed to help you assess whether parents possess sufficient capacity to make co-parenting work. It walks you through a structured analysis that corresponds to the four-part framework discussed earlier in this compilation. Then, it provides a list of potential safeguards that could be incorporated into a parenting plan to properly account for the nature, context and implications of abuse, if any.

At the outset, it is important to identify who the *functional* co-parents are going to be; that is, who is going to be co-parenting with whom? While we often assume that co-parenting arrangements are between the two legal parents or guardians of the child, in reality, parenting authority and parental responsibilities are sometimes delegated or relegated to someone else, like extended family members, new partners, professional caretakers, or others. This guide is intended to assess the *functional* parents' readiness for co-parenting. The functional parents may or may not be the two legal parents or guardians of the child – and they may or may not be the actual parties to the legal proceeding in which the parenting arrangement is being decided.

Readiness for Co-Parenting Assessment Guide

Successful co-parenting requires safe parental involvement, secure parent-child relationships, low parental conflict, effective parental communication, and clear boundaries between partner and parental roles.

Identify Domestic Abuse

- Does a structured interview reveal any signs or indications of physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or coercive controlling abuse?

Understand the Nature & Context of Abuse (*for purposes of co-parenting*)

- What is the quality of the parents' interactions with each other?
- What is the quality of the parents' interactions with each child?
- Does either parent interfere with the other's access to necessary and/or available resources?
- Does either parent threaten the other's capacity for self-determination?
- Does either parent pose a risk to any other family member's physical, sexual, or emotional safety, security or well-being?

Determine the Implications of Abuse (*co-parenting benchmarks*)

- Are relationships free from violence, threats of violence, and coercive control? □Y □N
- Do parents recognize and support children's needs? □Y □N
- Do children feel safe, secure and supported by parents? □Y □N
- Is communication between parents direct, civil, constructive, and focused on the children? □Y □N
- Do parents separate their role as parent from their role as partner? □Y □N

Account for Abuse in Actions and Decisions (*for any unmet benchmark*)

- Is there cause to:
  - Limit or monitor the abusive parent's access to a child or victim-parent?
  - Limit or monitor the abusive parent's decision-making authority?
  - Monitor the abusive parent's compliance with the parenting plan?
  - Require the abusive parent to participate in remedial interventions and/or other services?
  - Support the victim-parent's efforts to protect a child?
  - Strengthen a child's support system?

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CO-PARENTING

Safe Parental Involvement is….
□ Free from violence, threats of violence, and/or coercive control
□ Age and developmentally appropriate
□ Focused on and supportive of the child
□ Based on mastery of basic parenting skills and parental decision-making
□ Consistent with established rules and expectations

Secure Parental Relationships are….
□ Free from violence, threats of violence, and/or coercive control
□ Stable and predictable
□ Focused on and responsive to the needs of the child

Cooperation Between Parents requires….
□ Mutual responsibility and shared authority
□ Absence of violence, threats of violence, exploitation and/or coercion
□ Willingness to consider alternate viewpoints
□ Capacity to recognize and respond to others' needs (emotional maturity)
□ Ability to compromise and reach agreement on important issues

Effective Parental Communication is….
□ Open and direct
□ Civil and bi-directional
□ Constructive (not harmful or damaging and more than the mere sharing of information)
□ Focused on the children

Clear Boundaries Between Partner and Parental Roles mean….
□ Parents are able to separate their role as parents from their role as partners
□ Limits between partner and parental roles are clear and unambiguous

BENCHMARKS FOR CO-PARENTING

Use the following benchmarks to gauge the parties' readiness to co-parent. If all of the benchmarks are met, then co-parenting can proceed without accommodation at the election of the parties. If, on the other hand, any benchmark is not met, then the parties may not be ready for co-parenting. You should proceed with co-parenting only if the specific concerns you've identified can be ameliorated to the satisfaction of the parties. (See following sections for specific co-parenting challenges and prospective safeguards).

Relationships are free from violence, threats of violence, and coercive control:
Notes:

Parents recognize and support child's needs:
Notes:

Children feel safe, secure and supported by parents:
Notes:

Communication between parents is direct, civil, constructive, and focused on the child:
Notes:

Parents separate their role as parent from their role as partner:
Notes:

SAFEGUARDS FOR CO-PARENTING

If any of the co-parenting benchmarks are not met, the practitioner must determine whether it is possible to employ safeguards to effectively ensure safe parental involvement, secure parent-child relationships, cooperation between parents, effective parental communication, and clear boundaries between partner and parental roles. In making this determination, practitioners should consider the following co-parenting safeguards, among others:

Limit or monitor abusive parent's access to child or victim parent:
- Limit methods of communication with child (no in-person, telephonic or social media contact)
- Prescribe methods of communication (email only, text only, My Family Wizard, etc.)
- Restrict frequency of inter-parental communication or communication with child
- Restrict content of communication (define scope and boundaries, etc.)

- Restrict length of communication (1 page, 10-minutes, etc.)
- Limit access to sensitive information (account numbers, SSNs, medical & school records, etc.)
- Issue and/or enforce no contact orders and orders for protection
- Require neutral exchange locations (school, place of business, etc.)
- Require third party exchanges (friend, family member, professional, etc.)
- Restrict visitation to a place (grandparent's home, public park, church, counseling center, etc.)
- Restrict visitation to a geographic area (25-mile radius, in town, in state, in country, etc.)
- Prohibit visitation outside a geographic area (not out-of-town, out-of-state, or out-of-country)
- Condition visitation on having a third party present (friend, family member, professional)
- Limit who can be present during visitation (no new partners, no known criminals, etc.)
- Restrict what can happen during visitation (no alcohol, drugs, weapons, dangerous activities)
- Require professionally supervised or monitored visitation
- Set benchmarks for unsupervised access (no abuse, threats of abuse, inappropriate contact)
- Condition visits on compliance with terms (sobriety, BIP, car seat, valid drivers' license)
- Appoint a post-visitation monitor to make sure visits are safe and go as planned
- Periodically monitor and conduct risk and danger assessments
- Define consequences for non-compliance with access restrictions

Limit abusive parent's rulemaking or decision-making authority:

- Grant sole legal custody to non-abusive parent
- Grant sole legal custody to non-abusive parent with deviations under defined circumstances
- Grant parallel legal custody
- Grant parallel legal custody with deviations under prescribed circumstances
- Appoint a parenting consultant to confer with the abusive parent on all major decisions
- Appoint a parenting monitor to oversee and assess parenting decisions by the abusive parent
- Restrict abusive parent's access to information that is susceptible to misuse
- Limit abusive parent's ability to dispose of real or personal property or to dissipate assets
- Appoint a special master to monitor and effectuate property distributions and settlements

Monitor abusive parent's compliance with parenting plan:

- Conduct review hearings
- Establish schedule for abusive parent to show compliance with parenting plan
- Establish automatic consequences for non-compliance with parenting plan
- Appoint a compliance monitor paid for by the abusive parent

Enforce terms of parenting plan:

- Hold abusive parent accountable for unjustified and/or intentional parenting plan violations
- Establish self-executing terms to effectuate pre-defined consequences for non-compliance

Require abusive parent to participate in remedial interventions and/or other services:

- Refer abusive parent to a batterer intervention program for assessment and services
- Refer abusive parent to a parenting after violence program for assessment and services

Support victim parent's efforts to protect child:

- Link parental decision-making authority to parental responsibility for child's care
- Designate victim parent as the custodian of records
- Provide victim parent with information about/access to available community-based services
- Establish self-executing parenting plan enforcement mechanisms
- Allow direct and expedited access to parenting plan enforcement mechanisms
- Establish automatic bill-paying processes for abusive parent's financial obligations
- Require abusive parent to submit periodic parenting plan compliance reports
- Limit the grounds upon which abusive parent may object to victim parent's decision-making
- Delineate reasonable house rules in the parenting plan or order
- Allow the victim parent to relocate with the child in accordance with the law

Strengthen child's systems of support:

- Ensure that the parenting plan accommodates child's interests, activities, and supports
- Provide sufficient parenting time flexibility to adapt to child's developmental and social needs
- Structure parenting time to maintain access to child's support system
- Connect child and victim parent to available community-based resources