

Parenting After Separation

Pre-Mediation Reflection Sheet

A private thinking space for parents, before the joint session.

This is a thinking document, not a form. There is nothing to fill out, sign, or return. It is for you, in private, ahead of your mediation session.

The questions inside are designed to surface what you actually want for your children, what is working and what is not, and where you and the other parent already agree without realising it. Parents who arrive at mediation having thought these things through tend to have shorter, calmer, and more productive sessions.

If there is family violence in the relationship, a current Family Violence Order, or you have concerns about your safety or the children's safety, contact the practice before working through this document. The practitioner can adjust the mediation approach before you start.

About this reflection sheet

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The questions below are designed to surface what you actually want for your children, what is working and what is not, and where you and the other parent already agree without realising it. Parents who arrive at mediation having thought through these things tend to have shorter, calmer, and more productive sessions, because the work of figuring out what you think happens before the joint conversation, not during it.

Use as much or as little space as you need. Skip what is not relevant. Write in whatever form suits you, full sentences, dot points, scrawl in the margins, a separate notebook. The practitioner will not ask to see it.

If there is family violence in the relationship, a current Family Violence Order, or you have concerns about your safety or the children's safety, contact the practice before working through this document. Some of the prompts below assume a level of communication and trust between parents that does not always exist, and the practitioner can adjust the mediation approach before you start.

Where you are starting from

Your children

Take a moment to picture each child clearly before you start. Not the situation, the child.

- What is each child like right now? Their personality, what lights them up, what worries them, what they are good at, what they struggle with.
- What has the separation been like for each of them, as far as you can tell? Have they said anything directly? Have you noticed changes in their behaviour, sleep, schoolwork, friendships?
- What does each child need from you right now that they did not need a year ago?
- What does each child need from the other parent right now?
- If you have more than one child, are their needs and reactions different from each other? How?

Where things stand today

- What are the current living and care arrangements, even if informal? Who has the children when?
- What has been working in the arrangement so far?
- What has not been working?

- Have the children said anything about what they want, or what they do not like? Be honest about whether this came up naturally or whether one or both parents has asked them.
- What is your honest assessment of how the children are coping?

Where you would like to get to

- If mediation goes well, what does the parenting arrangement look like six months from now?
- What does it look like in five years?
- What is the one thing you most want to land on at mediation?
- What are you most worried about happening at mediation?

Time with the children

This is usually the most concrete part of any parenting arrangement, and often the most contested. Try to think through it in detail before the session, because the difference between a working arrangement and a failing one is often in the details.

A regular week or fortnight

- What does a regular week or fortnight look like in your preferred arrangement? Sketch the days and nights, who has the children, where the children sleep, school drop-off and pick-up.
- Why this pattern? What is it serving for the children, and for you?
- What is the minimum amount of time you want with the children? What is the maximum? What is realistic given work, distance, and the children's other commitments?
- What time with the other parent do you think is right for the children? Be specific, even if it is hard.
- If your preferred arrangement is different from what is happening now, what is the gap and why?

Handovers and transitions

- Where do handovers happen? Home to home, school, a neutral location?
- Who does the driving or transport?
- How do you imagine handovers going, in terms of conversation, body language, what the children see?

- If handovers have been tense, what would make them less tense?
- How do the children themselves manage the transition between homes? Do they need time to settle, a routine, a particular object or person?

School term and school holidays

- Should school term and school holidays follow the same pattern, or a different one?
- How are school holidays divided? Equal blocks, alternating, by week, by event?
- Public holiday weekends, pupil-free days, school sport carnivals, school camps. Who handles what?
- Long holidays such as Christmas and the long summer break often need their own plan. What do you have in mind?

Special days and significant events

These are the ones that ambush parents at mediation when nobody has thought about them in advance.

Birthdays

- Each child's birthday. How is the day itself spent? Does each parent have the child on the day, alternate years, share the day, celebrate separately?
- The other parent's birthday. Should the children be with that parent, even if it is "your" day in the regular rotation?
- Your birthday. Same question.
- Grandparents' birthdays, siblings' birthdays, important family events on each side.

Christmas, religious and cultural events

- Christmas Day itself. Christmas Eve. Boxing Day. How are these split, if at all?
- Easter. Same questions.
- Other religious observances that matter to your family. Ramadan, Diwali, Hanukkah, Lunar New Year, Passover. If your family observes any of these, how should the children participate?
- Cultural events particular to your family's heritage or community.

- For First Nations children, connection to country, community and cultural events. How is this maintained across both homes?

Mother's Day, Father's Day, school events

- Mother's Day. Should the children always be with their mother, regardless of the regular rotation?
- Father's Day. Same question.
- School concerts, assemblies, awards nights, sports days, parent-teacher interviews. Who attends? Both parents? Alternating? It depends on the event?
- School graduations, formals, milestone events.

Holidays away

- Domestic holidays. Does either parent need permission to take the children interstate? Notice period?
- Overseas travel. Passports, consent for international travel, who holds the passports, what notice is required.
- Holidays with extended family that are important to your family's traditions.

Major decisions

These are the long-term decisions that shape your children's lives. The law calls them "major long-term issues" and they generally need both parents to agree, but the practical question is how the two of you will actually make decisions together, given how things are between you.

Education

- Which school do the children attend now? Public, private, religious, independent? Are you both happy with that?
- When does the next school change come up? End of primary, end of high school, a move between schools?
- How will school choice decisions be made? Joint discussion, one parent decides certain subjects, you agree on the principles and one of you handles the logistics?
- Tutoring, learning support, gifted programs, anything else educational.

Health

- General practitioner. Same one for both parents, or each parent uses their own?
- Specialists, dentist, optometrist, allergist, paediatrician.
- Medication and ongoing treatment. Who manages refills, who attends appointments?
- Mental health support for the children, including counselling related to the separation itself.

- Vaccinations. Particularly if you have different views.
- Emergency situations. Who is contacted first, who has authority to consent to treatment when the other parent cannot be reached?

Religion, values, and identity

- Religious observance, if any. How are the children raised?
- If parents practise different religions, or one practises and one does not, how is that handled across the two homes?
- Cultural identity, language, heritage. Particularly important for bilingual households or where one parent is from a different cultural background.
- Values you both consider non-negotiable for the children. Honesty, kindness, education, work ethic, whatever they are.

Identity and legal matters

- Surname. Are the children's surnames staying the same? If a parent re-partners and changes their own name, what happens?
- Passports and travel documents.
- Significant life decisions when the children are older. Driver's licence, leaving home, university choices.

Relocation

This is one of the most fraught issues in parenting matters, and worth thinking about even if neither of you is planning to move.

- Are either of you considering moving in the next few years? Interstate, overseas, regional, even a different suburb that affects school zone?
- What would each of you accept in terms of distance? At what point does a move stop being "moving house" and start being "relocation" that affects the parenting arrangement?
- If a move did happen, what would need to change about the time-with arrangement, the financial arrangement, school?

Day-to-day life

Each parent runs their own household when the children are with them. That is normal and expected. But there are some day-to-day matters where consistency between homes helps the children, and others where each parent's autonomy matters.

Routine and rhythm

- Bedtime, mealtimes, screen-time limits. How aligned do these need to be between homes?
- Homework. Whose home it gets done at, expectations, what happens with longer projects that span the rotation.
- Extracurricular activities. Who pays, who drives, who attends, what happens to the activity when the child is with the other parent?
- Friends and social life. Sleepovers, parties, birthday invitations, what one parent commits to that the other has to honour.

Discipline and parenting approach

- Different parenting styles between separated parents is normal. But where do you draw the line on what is acceptable and what is not?
- Are there approaches the other parent uses that you find inappropriate? Be honest with yourself. Some of these are differences in style. Some are concerns about wellbeing. Try to know which is which.
- Are there approaches you use that the other parent has objected to? Sit with that for a moment.

Other adults in the children's lives

- New partners. When is it appropriate to introduce a new partner to the children? How is this communicated to the other parent?
- New partners' children. Step-siblings, blended families, how the children navigate that.
- Grandparents and extended family. How much time with grandparents from each side? Is there any tension you are aware of?
- Other caregivers. Babysitters, nannies, before and after school care, holiday programs.

Communication between children and the absent parent

- When the children are with one parent, how does the other parent stay in touch? Phone, video call, text, scheduled or whenever?
- Are there age-appropriate ground rules? A six-year-old and a fifteen-year-old have very different needs and capacities here.
- If a child does not want to call or speak to the other parent on a given day, how is that handled?

Money for the children

Child support and parenting financial arrangements often run on a separate track from the property settlement, but they need thinking through. Child support is a legal scheme administered by Services Australia. What follows is not about formal child support amounts, it is about everything that sits around it.

The basic picture

- Has either of you applied for a child support assessment? If yes, what is the current arrangement?
- Are you considering a private agreement (limited or binding child support agreement) instead of the statutory assessment?
- If informal arrangements exist now, what are they? Be honest about what is actually happening.

Who pays for what

These are the questions that get awkward in practice. Better to think them through privately first.

- School fees, uniforms, textbooks, excursions, camps, formals. Who pays, in what proportion?
- Extracurricular activities. Music lessons, sports, dance, equipment, registration fees, competitions.
- Health costs not covered by Medicare or private health insurance. Dental, orthodontic, optical, mental health, allied health.
- Phones, devices, and data plans for the children. Especially relevant once they are old enough to have one.

- Clothing and shoes. Do they stay at the home of the parent who bought them, or move between homes with the child?
- Birthdays and Christmas presents. From whom, to whom, who pays for parties.
- Pocket money or allowance, if any. Is there a shared approach or each parent decides?
- One-off significant costs as they come up. School laptops, braces, a first car, university costs when the time comes.

How decisions are made about new expenses

- Below what amount can either parent commit the children to a cost without consulting the other? Tickets to a concert, a sports tour, an unexpected school excursion.
- Above what amount does it need a joint decision?
- What happens when you cannot agree on a cost?

Things at each home

The boring practical stuff that matters more than it should.

- School uniforms and school bags. Do these live at one home or move with the child?
- Sports gear, instruments, dance kit. Same question.
- Devices, laptops, tablets. School-issued and personal.
- Clothes. Each home maintains its own wardrobe, or clothes move with the child?
- Comfort items, soft toys, special objects. These often need to move with the child even when other things do not.
- Medications.
- Birth certificates, Medicare cards, passports. Who holds the originals?

When things change

A parenting arrangement is not a contract. Things shift. Anticipating that is part of the work.

Short-term changes

- A child is sick on a school day during your week. Who looks after them? Does the other parent get a call?
- One parent has a work trip, a wedding, a funeral. How are short-term swaps handled?
- A school strike day, public health closure, anything that shifts the schedule unexpectedly.

Longer-term changes

- A change in either parent's work or income.
- A new relationship that becomes serious, or a new partner moving in.
- A new baby in either household.
- A child becoming a teenager and wanting more autonomy over where they spend their time.
- A move within or outside the local area.
- A child's school changes.

How you make changes to the arrangement

- For minor swaps, who initiates and how? Text, email, an app?
- For larger changes, what process do you imagine? Talk first, then write it down? A formal review every six or twelve months?
- Is mediation an option you would both return to if a significant disagreement comes up later?

Each child, individually

If you have more than one child, take a moment to think about each one separately rather than as a unit. Their needs, ages, and reactions to the separation will be different.

For each child, briefly note:

- Their name and age.
- What they specifically need from you.
- What they specifically need from the other parent.
- What is going well for them right now.
- What you are worried about for them.
- Anything they have said about the separation, the arrangements, the future.
- Whether anything in the broader arrangement needs to be different for this child compared to their siblings.

Before you go in

A short personal check before the mediation session.

- What is your one most important goal for the session?
- What is the other parent's most important goal, as far as you can tell? Try to state it generously, as they would state it themselves.
- Where do you already agree, even if you have not said so out loud?
- Where are you furthest apart?
- What is one thing you are willing to give ground on?
- What is one thing you are not willing to give ground on, and why?
- What do you want the children to be able to say about how their parents handled this, ten years from now?

A note on the children themselves

Children do not need to know the contents of this document. They do not need to be asked to choose between parents, to comment on arrangements, or to take sides on any issue raised here. The role of parents and the role of the mediator is to make decisions that are appropriate for the children, with whatever input the children offer naturally, age-appropriately, and on their own terms.

If there is a particular issue where you genuinely do not know what the children think, or where the children themselves have asked to have a say, raise it with the practitioner. There are appropriate ways for children's voices to be heard in mediation when that is right for the matter and for the children.

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This reflection sheet is general information to help you prepare for Family Dispute Resolution. It is not legal advice. If you have specific questions about your legal rights or obligations as a parent, obtain independent legal advice.