

Co-Parenting and COVID-19



In this difficult and rapidly changing time when many are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that this presents particularly unique challenges to parents who co-parent their children. The normal stresses of coordinating tasks and responsibilities are even more difficult with COVID cases in schools and parents attempting to juggle childcare with changing job requirements and restricted social interaction. *Children can sense the anxieties of their parents and other adults in their lives.*

The PEI Family Court Counsellors Office and the Family Law Centre recommend this is the time when it is most important that parents take the following steps to provide the support and assurances that children need:

- ensure that children have as little disruption in their parenting time as possible;
- maintain court-ordered parenting time schedules to the greatest extent possible; and
- remain vigilant in keeping conflict away from your children.

Remember: A pandemic is not a reason to keep your children away from their other parent. Regular parenting time schedules should be maintained, unless someone is self-isolating or under quarantine.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

How do we practice social distancing during an exchange?

When possible, parenting exchanges might happen at a public parking lot, assuring that adults remain the **recommended social distance** from each other. You should ensure that children's hands are washed frequently. Clothing, toys, and other personal belongings should be washed after each exchange.

SELF-ISOLATION

How do we parent from two or more homes if self-isolation is required or someone develops symptoms?

If you are parenting a child from two or more homes, the following is suggested in circumstances of **self-isolation**:

- If you or someone in your household is required to self-isolate, notify your co-parent of this right away, so that the two of you can make a plan that's safe for the children, even if that plan means temporarily altering the parenting schedule in your court order or parental agreement;
- If the children can't spend physical time with one parent due to self-isolation, the onus is on the resident parent (the parent the children are currently staying with) to facilitate frequent contact between the child and their other parent in other ways, such as through phone calls and videoconferencing (e.g. Skype or FaceTime)
- If the parenting schedule has to be temporarily changed due to self-isolation, when the self-isolation period is over, try to provide make-up time to the parent who missed out on time.

What happens when the self-isolation period is over?

When a self-isolation period is over, try to provide make-up time to the parent who missed out on time.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

While my children were with their co-parent, I became a close contact of a COVID case so I am required to self-isolate. However, our order says that the children are supposed to be in my care starting tomorrow. What do we do?

If you are required to self-isolate and you do not currently have the children in your care, but your parenting schedule indicates the children are supposed to return to your care before your self-isolation is over, talk to your co-parent about whether the children can remain in their care until you are finished self-isolating. If it is not possible for the

children to remain in your co-parent's care until you are done self-isolating, discuss whether the children can stay with another trusted adult until you are finished self-isolating.

My child is a close contact of a COVID case at school, so we are all required to self-isolate. However, our parenting agreement says that the children are supposed to go to their other parent's house tomorrow. What do we do?

Notify your co-parent immediately that you and the children are required to self-isolate. If the children go to your co-parent's house before the children's self-isolation period is over, that means that

your co-parent and everyone in their household could be at risk of exposure to COVID-19 and they will also have to self-isolate for the time period directed by public health. If there are other children in your co-parent's household, or if people with compromised immune systems live there, your children should not stay there if at all possible until your children are done self-isolating. If possible, the children should remain in your care until the children's self-isolation period is complete.

At the same time, parents must be willing to adapt these rules if they or other household members require self-isolation or present as symptomatic.

Guidelines for parents of children living in two or more homes during COVID-19

Recommendations of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts

1. BE HEALTHY – Model good behaviour for your children with intensive hand washing, wiping down surfaces and other objects that are frequently touched. Maintain social distancing, and self-isolation, if ordered by the PEI Chief Public Health Officer. Follow the guidance of the Chief Public Health Office found online.

2. BE MINDFUL – Maintain a calm attitude and convey to your children your belief that everything will return to normal in time. Avoid making careless comments in front of children and exposing them to endless media coverage intended for adults. At the same time, encourage your children to ask questions and answer them truthfully at a level that is age-appropriate.

3. BE COMPLIANT **with Court Orders and Parenting Agreements.**

Court orders exist to prevent endless haggling over the details of timesharing; if schools are closed, for example, parenting schedules should remain in force as though school were still in session. If your visits or exchanges were supposed to occur through the Supervised Parenting Time and Exchange Program, you are encouraged to contact your lawyer. However, note that temporary changes to parenting schedules may need to be made if a family member is required to self-isolate.

4. BE CREATIVE – Some parents will have to work extra hours to help deal with the crisis, and other parents may be out of work or working reduced hours for a time. Plans will inevitably have to change. Encourage closeness with the parent who is not going to see your child by way of shared books, movies, games, FaceTime or Skype.

5. BE TRANSPARENT – Try to agree on what steps each of you as parents will take to protect the children from exposure. Parents should inform each other right away if a child is showing any possible symptoms of COVID-19.

6. BE GENEROUS – Try to provide make-up time to the parent who missed out on parenting time, if at all possible. Generally, judges expect that parents will make reasonable accommodations, in situations where it is safe to do so, and judges will take seriously concerns raised in later filings about parents who are inflexible in highly unusual circumstances.

Adversity can become an opportunity for parents to come together and focus on what is best for their children. For many children, the strange days of the pandemic will leave vivid memories. It is important for every child to know and remember that both parents did everything they could to explain what was happening and to keep their children safe.

CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

It is important to know that Child Protection Services may consider a child to be in need of protection if the child is considered at substantial risk of suffering harm caused by failure of a parent to protect a child, such as if a parent knowingly exposes the child to a situation where the child is at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Every Islander has a duty to report known or suspected case(s) of child abuse. To report, call 1-877-341-3101 during business hours (8:30 am - 5:00 pm) and 1-800-341-6868 after-hours and on weekends.

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**COVID-19
PEI Information Line 1-833-533-9333**

