

Preparing for your first Children arrangements mediation session

Introduction

When preparing for your first mediation session to discuss future child arrangements please read the relevant chapter in the Divorce Manual and complete the relevant documentation.

This might seem obvious but you will be amazed how many parents do not do this or indeed do anything different than they have been doing and expect things to improve for themselves.

If you wish to make the most of the mediation opportunity it is important that you and the other parent prepare well for what the mediation process will ask of you both.

Process

You will have between 1.5 and 2 hours to construct a plan together which meets your children's needs as well as suits both parents, ensuring that it is likely to work in practice when it is put the test.

In order to be able to do this you will need to focus on creating and maintaining a quality of communication that works for you both which is open, honest, respect and flexible in approach.

Having established the principle of mediation, the mediator will begin the session by asking you what you wish to use the time to discuss and sort out. If you both differ in your priorities the mediator will agree with you both how best to divide the time during the session to ensure that the most important matters are considered.

Hopefully, you will have both at least completed a **Parenting Plan** on which to base your discussions.

You can either pick specific aspects of the Parenting plan to discuss or simply start at the top and work your way through.

At the end of the session the mediator will summarise the outcome arrangements and plan which you both hopefully agreed to implement.

Preparation

As well as the Parenting plan you are also recommended to complete the **Children and Parent questionnaires** which will hopefully help you to maintain an open and flexible mindset, thinking in an empathically curious way about your own needs as well as the needs of the other parent and, of course, first and foremost, your children's needs and how you and the other parent are going to meet these with your child arrangements and plan.

To a large extent, the success of the plan will depend on the quality of your ongoing inter-personal communication as you are both tested when you begin to put the plan in place.

We also strongly recommend that you read and use the chapter in the Divorce Book all about **preparing to communicate in mediation** which is relevant to the quality of your ongoing communication.

We also recommend the services of a Coach to help you develop your skills to improve your communication with the other parent.

Skills required

When mediation starts and you begin to touch on subjects which you have previously disagreed about or matters which trigger negative beliefs you hold about each other you are likely to feel challenged and feel the need to react.

The irony with mediation is that it is often the quietly spoken empathic parent, lacking in self-confidence and the ability to assert themselves who is best equipped since the mediation process requires each person to listen very closely and actively to each other and get to the bottom of what each other is thinking so that the conversation can be based around the things of most important to each person.

This kind of conversation requires among other things, humility, open curiosity, patience, concentration, flexibility of thinking, self-restraint and empathy all of which the mediator will help you with.

It certainly does not require a bullish insistence on being correct, a rigid assertion of one's rights, angry judgemental and blaming comments or a defensive reactive manner.

Mediation requires parents to express and share their thoughts and views and invite each other to come up with ideas about how to overcome differences of opinions and concerns.

If the mediation does end up in argument or involves conversations you find difficult don't worry this is quite normal, but we recommend that you use the **post argument questionnaires** as tools to help you reflect on what went well, what did not go so well and what could be changed, adapted or modified next time to improve communication.

Resources and support

The Divorce Manual with its resources is a starting point but is only useful if it is put to good use.

So please read the relevant sections and complete the relevant documents ready to discuss them with an open, constructive mindset and approach.

No one says you have to agree with each other, but you will make much more progress in mediation if you both feel listened to, understood and invited by each other to engage in a solution and future focused conversation to discover mutual outcomes based on satisfying the most important needs of the children and of course your own.

Documents

Parenting plan- Set out your ideas and options for discussion in mediation.

Children questionnaire- identify and clarify your children's most important needs enabling you and the other parent to work together to create an emotionally secure environment for your children

Parenting questionnaire- identify and clarify yours and the other parents most important needs, as a parent enabling you both to work more closely together, supporting each other as parents

Post argument questionnaires- use these as a framework to reflect on how you can improve communication based on your experiences of each other so far.