

Preparing for successful child changeover arrangements

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In family law parenting matters, the Court can make parenting orders about how your child moves between their time with one parent to the other. This process is called ‘changeover’. Court orders may include where changeover is to take place and at what times. Like all parenting orders, orders for changeover are made in consideration of your child’s best interests.

Sometimes, the actual changeover process can feel more stressful and complex than the orders seem. Leaving a parent and moving between homes may make your child nervous or reluctant. In this blog, we will look at what to expect at changeover and ways to make the process positive and comfortable for you and your child.

Key steps for a stress-free changeover in family law parenting matters

In the lead-up to changeover

A successful changeover does not just happen on the day. Taking steps to prepare you and your child, both practically and emotionally, can help to set up a smooth transition.

Below are some things you can do to alleviate nerves leading up to changeover day:

- Choose a suitable location for changeover – some parents opt for a public space such as a shopping centre or playground to promote a child-focused changeover. If it is appropriate, your child’s school is also a good option as drop off/pick up arrangements can occur without interaction with the other parent. If you and the other parent have a collaborative and positive co-parenting relationship, changeovers at your respective homes are also a common option.

- Be organised – have everything ready for the change between homes, especially things like favourite toys, homework, or co-curricular items. It may be helpful to keep a list of the things your child needs when they move from your home to the other parent's home, so that nothing gets forgotten.
- Prepare yourself – changeover can be stressful time, especially interacting with a former partner. Take time before the day of changeover to check in with your own emotions so that you can be ready to facilitate a calm changeover. Your child will benefit from seeing you treat the changeover in a calm and positive light.

Choosing the timing of changeover

Another consideration is the time the changeover is scheduled for. The best arrangements are dependent on your child, including their age.

Common arrangements for changeover time include before or after the child's nap time concludes (for younger children, babies and toddlers), or at the beginning &end of school day.

Arranging for one parent to drop off the child at school and the other parent to collect the child at the end of the school day is also suitable for parents who find interactions at changeover challenging. Be sure to inform your child's school of any changeover arrangements you and the other parent make for your child so they can help facilitate the process.

At the changeover

The most important thing for a successful changeover is to remain child-focused. This time is not an opportunity to speak badly to the other parent or criticise them in front of your child – children pick up on their parents' body language and emotions, so if you're showing signs of stress, they are likely to reflect that stress and become anxious and fearful when changeover day comes.

Be cordial to the other parent – even short and polite conversations can show your child that their parents are not hostile towards one another. Witnessing or hearing arguments at changeover can make children feel that they are in the middle of the dispute or being used by their parents to 'win' in conflicts with the other parent.

Children will remember any arguments or fights more than positive memories and may begin to feel unsafe at changeover. Even if the other parent tried to engage in an argument, try to politely shut down the discussion or change topics. By minimising your child's exposure to conflict and making changeover a positive experience, you can help your child feel secure and cared for as they transition between homes.

After the changeover ends

The need for a positive atmosphere does not end once changeover is done. The car ride home is not a time to interrogate your child about their time with the other parent.

If your child feels that they need to ‘report back’ to you on the activities and behaviours of the other parent, it may make them feel stressed and anxious about sharing any positive experiences they had. Keep conversations open and encouraging. Allowing your child to express positive emotions about their time with the other parent will help to improve the co-parenting relationship and your child’s wellbeing.

General tips that make changeover a smooth and positive process

- Be on time – not being rushed will help lessen any anxiety you or your child may have about changeover and show the other parent that you are respectful of their time;
- Keep discussions about time with your child positive – focus on activities your child enjoyed or any achievements they completed;
- Avoid discussions about finances or separation – these conversations are better suited for another time outside of changeover.

What should I do if my child is nervous about changeover?

It is natural for children to feel nervous and stressed in the lead-up to and during changeover. Below are some tips to help your child feel more comfortable and secure about changeover. Each child is different, so try a few different things and encourage your child to share what works for them.

- Be open and transparent about changeover – be honest about the process, but keep it positive;
- Discuss it ahead of time – something simple like a calendar on the wall can help give your child plenty of time to adjust to the idea of changeover before the day arrives;
- Prepare your child for the changeover – help them pack some favourite snacks, toys or books, especially if there is a long drive between homes. You and the other parent might also consider having duplicate items at each house (such as toiletries or clothes) so that your child is packing less for each transition;
- Keep a routine so that changeover feels familiar and more comfortable – small things like the same location, same snacks, and same time can make your child feel more prepared for changeover. If changeovers are rushed or are different each time, your child might become anxious and view it as a stressful time;
- Keep farewells brief and positive – saying “I love you” rather than “I’ll miss you” can help your child transition between homes.

Supervised changeovers in family law parenting matters

Sometimes parents require additional support at changeover, particularly where there is difficulty in communicating or engaging safely with the other parent.

Changeover arrangements can include family members, such as the child’s grandparents, who can provide support and encourage positive and friendly behaviour between the parents. Their role is also guided by your child’s best interests – meaning they are not

there to encourage conflict or interrogation of the other parent.

Some parents may require the assistance of a supervised contact service. These services include child contact centres as a location for changeovers or having a supervisor present at your chosen changeover location to facilitate the transition.

The purpose of involving a supervised contact service is to promote a safe and child-focused environment for changeovers if parents are having difficulty. Using a supervised contact service can be agreed on by you and the other parent privately, or they can be incorporated into parenting orders made by the Court.

Get help from a family lawyer

If you have questions about changeover arrangements or are unsure how to make these arrangements with your child's other parent, Smith Family Law can help. Our family lawyers are experienced in assisting parents with making changeover arrangements, including recommendations for supervised contact services.

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