

# CUSTODY

## WITHOUT COURTS



How To Avoid Costly Attorney Fees and Complicated, Time Consuming Court Dates by Creating a Long-Term Custody Plan that works for Your Child, You and Your Co-Parent

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## **Custody Without Courts**

*How To Avoid Costly Attorney Fees and Complicated, Time Consuming Court Dates by Creating a Long-Term Child Custody Plan that works for Your Child, You and Your Co-Parent...*

By Thom Tessandori



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## Introduction

You never planned that your marriage wouldn't work out or that you'd break up with your previous partner.

You never even dreamed that you'd have to stand up and "fight" to see your own child. You certainly weren't prepared to go to Court to have to tell a bunch of *strangers* why you are fit to be a parent.

But it happened. Or at least this idea of this came up in conversation.

And when it did, there's a good chance that you felt unprepared, intimidated and even a little scared.

For me, it happened almost a cold coming on. I sort of knew something wasn't right on Monday, by Wednesday I wasn't sleeping in my own bed and by Friday my (now Ex) Partner was telling me that she wasn't coming home over the weekend.

I was devastated and really caught off-guard.

But I'll tell you more about my own story later.

What I didn't know *at the time* was that I was getting lucky.

I was getting lucky in the sense that what I was about to create was a powerful custody plan with my Ex-Partner. A Plan that she didn't just agree to, but that she embraced. What ended up happening was that we created a "win-win" out of a situation that easily could have had the best of either of us. And this is what I want for you.

Even during the times we were barely speaking to each other, we both held solid to the idea that we wanted to raise an amazing daughter who is bright, kind and loving.

And we did.

Now we lead completely different lives. I got married and adopted a Son. Now I've got two kids and a wife at home.

She stayed single and spends one-on-one quality time with our daughter.

So, if you are struggling right now with whatever you are in, I want to tell you that it's going to be okay. In fact, it's going to be better than okay.

You've been given a choice, a deciding factor that in this moment and for moments moving into the future, you are going to create something that works for you.

This is my promise to you and this eBook explains, in great detail, how I did it. I've included all the tools and documents that I wish I'd had when I started my own custody plan process.

So, stick with me on an adventure. It's an adventure in human communication, parenting and negotiation. It's also a journey into authenticity and integrity, as you soon will learn.

Before we get into the specific details, I want to make sure that you approach "Custody Without Courts" with an open mind. Some of the things I'm going to ask of you are going to require you to get outside of your comfort zone. There might be some strong

feelings from the past that come up and you might need to have some hard conversations with some folks you don't want to.

That said, I want to assure you that the outcome far outweighs the immediate challenges you might face.

### **A Very Important Legal Disclaimer**

I am not an attorney or a lawyer. I don't pretend to be one. In fact, I know very little about the Court system in general but I do know a few things about how the Custody system works. I learned from friends (and some not-so-friendly folks) while I was on this journey. Some friends love the court system and think it works great in their situation while others detest it and can't stand the Custody scenario they are in.

I am not offering legal advice in this Book or in my Podcast or in the Newsletters I write. In fact, the entire point of this book is to offer help for you to make up your own custody agreement that will work for your child. Notice I didn't say "work for you" or "work for your Ex-Partner". You're going to put your child first, but then make it as workable as possible for you and others.

This book is about how to use language, sometimes even sophisticated expression(s) like Neuro-Linguistic Programming, to get a workable system that will benefit your child first, you second and your Ex-Partner third.

This book is about how to put your knowledge into action, both in creating and implementing your Custody Agreement. Some of this knowledge you already have and some of this education I'm going to share with you in this book might be new. In either case, both you and I want the same outcome: A workable Child Custody plan that is enjoyable for everyone.

If it is not your plan to benefit your Child first and you are out for yourself, please write me and I'll offer a full refund of the price of this book. It's that important to me that you put your child first.

So, my friends who know more than I do about legal matters tell me that I have to say this book is for "Entertainment Only" and that you are responsible for any of the actions you take. It's my mission to guide you to make good choices in a potentially tough situation, but ultimately it's you who is subject to how you use this in the real world.

With that said, let's get to some actions you can take NOW so that you can avoid the Court system altogether and start spending time with your kids, not having to worry about expensive legal fees or missing a court appearance.

## [My Story & How You Can Learn From My Mistakes](#)

My girlfriend and I had moved from the town I grew up in to the biggest city in our state. We'd had a daughter together who was almost a year old at the time. She was almost 9 months old when we moved to a new city.

We were in love and had planned on getting married. I had got her an engagement ring, asked her to marry me and the whole enchilada. At least what I considered to be "the whole enchilada".

We even bought a house in an up-and-coming neighborhood and started settling into family life.

I really felt like I'd arrived. I had a great girlfriend and future wife, a job that I loved and I was learning how to be a father.

Then, almost out of the blue, she started complaining about things.

Just little things at first. Things that didn't make sense to me.

Then, she laid in bed for two days straight and started to act distant to me. Pretty soon, this behavior started to cycle and I noticed patterns in her complaining that were persistent. This was frustrating to me because I didn't know how to help.

I lied to myself and brushed it off as she was really tired, or some excuse I told myself at the time.

Then she started going out without me or our daughter.

First it was twice a week, then three times a week and pretty soon she was telling me that she wasn't going to come home that night.

Now, on one hand telling me she wasn't coming home was great because at least it set my expectations. She set my expectations so that I wouldn't stress out about her not coming home.

Even though she told me this, I still worried and felt panic about where she was, what she was doing and whom she was doing it with.

I felt like I was close to losing it, but I didn't crack. I stayed home with our daughter and toughed out "this phase". By this time our child was a lovely 18 month old baby that was fun to be around.

When she did come home, my Ex-Partner requested that I sleep in another room as she stayed up late chatting with different people online.

And, in hindsight bowing to her requests was a bad idea, I just let it happen. I became a victim to the circumstances that we were creating and I did nothing to stop it. Now that I have a full view of our past relationship, I can fully take responsibility for not saying or doing anything.

Eventually she left the house, getting her own apartment and starting her life without me in it.

It was only after the fact that I really got that I was part of the equation.



And when I took responsibility for it... when I really took ownership of it, I understood that it was for the best.

She was unhappy and this, in turn, made me unhappy. What I couldn't see at the time was that we were living in a very unhappy house. In fact, there was nothing I could have done at the time to change this.

Even though everything on the surface looked "perfect" with a new house, a healthy baby and a good job there was still something off. She just happened to see it before I did.

And I'm glad she did.

I didn't like breaking-up and I didn't like having to put together a Custody Plan to raise our daughter in different houses, but it was what needed to happen.

Even after I realized all this and emotionally "released" her (inside myself) with the blessing of going out and constructing her new life, it still took me well over a year to get used to her not being around.

But eventually the pain did go away.

I went on to get married to a really great woman.

And I also went on to adopt a 2 year old Son with that amazing wife.

I still have the house we bought and I still have a great job, but now I also share custody of my daughter with an amazing Co-Parent who, like me, wants the best for her daughter. We might not be romantic partners any longer, but as Co-Parents we're a pretty great fit.

I hope that you find my story helpful, even if it's just in the sense of being real with you and honest.

If you are in the midst of a break-up, I understand what you are going through and I want to assure you that it will get better.

In fact, I have so much confidence that it's going to get better that I want to share with you the mistakes I made during a break-up so that you can avoid them in yours.

## **Mistakes I Made That You Can Avoid**

Okay, here it comes. I'm going to share some of the mistakes I made during the break-up with my Previous Partner.

In sharing this with you, it's my ultimate hope that you avoid these altogether.

Or, if these are happening to you, you can work through them in a way to get stronger with yourself.

If you are in the middle of any of these, take comfort in knowing that these are common mistakes and you have control over being stuck with these or getting out of them. Sometimes it's not super clear when they are happening, but if you are getting a "gut feeling" about any of these mistakes, there is a good chance they are occurring for you.

### **Mistake #1: Worrying and trying to change someone else**

When my Co-Parent would spend the night other places it was right before we all had mobile "devices" in our pockets. I would worry tremendously about her. Sure, there were cell phones, but we weren't "connected" in the way that it is now. I remember laying in my bed, with the home phone ready to dial her at any moment but then choosing not to.

I was in a state of anxiety as to her safety and comfort. This feeling of being out of control was overwhelming in the moment.

You might relate to it as that weird "back and forth" you do sometimes. I was asking myself if I would do more harm than good if I called her to check-in. All with my daughter sleeping next to me in my bed.

When we did speak, which wasn't much towards the end, I really tried to change her.

I tried by pleading with her to stay with me for the sake of our kid and then I tried by being angry. As it turns out, none of that worked. In fact, it was no surprise that those actions just made things worse.

And I found out the hard way that the same goes for worrying.

If you are worrying about what your Co-Parent is doing, whom they are seeing and interacting with or what they are doing with their lives, just stop it. It does no good and in fact does more damage to you than it does your Co-Parent.

It's a difficult thing to do sometimes, but it's necessary if we're going to set-up a custody agreement that everyone sees as an *opportunity* rather than a "have to". The last thing you want to do is cajole or manipulate your Previous Partner into something they aren't going to be able to follow-through on. That's not fair to anyone involved.

To put it simply: You can't change someone. Even if they are open to talking to you and seeing what you see, until they feel whatever you feel as an opportunity, you aren't going to be able to change them. They can only change themselves.

To help with this, accept uncertainty. But do so in a way that makes sense for you.

So, it might be helpful to start with something small: Are they going to not have decaf coffee at work today? Or will school get closed down today due to bad weather?

Obviously these are small, insignificant things to not worry about but when you do this a few times you'll start to see how incredibly insignificant and small your worries about people really are.

### **Mistake #2: Needlessly trying to complicate things**

What became apparent to me during this transitional period (the break-up and starting conversations about a Custody Agreement) was that I wanted control. I wanted control in all aspects of my life because it's what I was used to (as a single man before the birth of my daughter and often for what I considered to be for my child's benefit). However, that's no excuse to over-complicate things. Once you bring another human onto this planet you are responsible for raising them to the best of your ability, regardless of how much control you have.

Put another way, the things I controlled I was *responsible* for and for the first time in my life, a very important Previous Partner was breaking this level of control.

This doesn't mean control over a person. What I'm talking about is control of your life - things like where you live, who your friends are, your financial situation and what you do for hobbies just to scratch the surface.

Said another way, what I'm really talking about is control of my *circumstances*. And what I didn't fully realize at the time was that I was indeed in control of my situation - on many levels.

This need of control, or the feeling like I needed to be in control, just complicated matters further when put in the context of a Custody Agreement. If I felt like I was out of control, I'd lash out or say unkind words or withhold some sort of emotion like love and just be angry.

If you are in this place right now, do your best to not try to complicate things. This is really the only way you are going to create a Custody plan that works. You keep things simple and yes, I'm here to tell you that there are going to be things that you are going to need to "give up" control of.

And look, eventually your Son or Daughter is going to become a teenager and with that is going to come a whole new set of challenges that are going to require that you give up a little bit of control just to be a part of their lives. (Well, hopefully not that extreme, but I'm sure you can relate to what I said because you were a teenager once).

I would do your best to keep things as simple as possible because once you put your plan in place it's probably going to feel a little complex (and even complicated) at first. Hang in there because there is much more at stake than your control.

### **Mistake #3: Thinking only about myself**

Break-ups are difficult because most of us just want to show the other person "our side". I remember telling myself "*if she only knew how I really felt and what I bring to our relationship there is no way she'd want to leave*". When you are in the thick of resolving a relationship, especially a romantic relationship, it's very difficult to see someone else's perspective.

This was true for me in that I self-identified with our relationship. I couldn't even imagine my life without her and especially without my child.

But guess what? When I "gave up" putting myself first I was instantly freed up to focus on the thing that really mattered: My Child.

Yes, self-expression is important and I don't want to discount that. However, full self-expression has nothing to do with Ego, which was the root cause of me desiring to put my needs first.

In fact, it's entirely possible for you to be self-expressed in a way that doesn't victimize or blame the other person. You can take ownership of your feelings in a way where the other person understands your emotions and at the same time you get your point across.

They might not agree or they might not give you the support you are looking for, but this way you can know that at least they've heard you and that you've been honest with them.

So, as we are creating this Custody Plan we're going to practice things like empathy and flexibility in order to understand what your Previous Partner wants. Then, we're going to get together and give it to them in a way where you feel just as empowered and important as they do. This might sound too good to be true during this first section, but hang in there with me and you'll soon see that it's entirely possible to create something that works for both Co-Parents.

Believe it or not, there is power in giving up Control and we're going to take that on in the first section of this book.

#### **Mistake #4: Avoiding the real challenges**

It really amazes me that for as much as I wanted to be in control, how much straight up resistance there was from me in my relationship with my Previous Partner.

It's like the story I heard about how a couple gets in the huge fight, with blame and unkind words flying back and forth, only to realize that it was about who left the cap off the toothpaste.

Well, there is no toothpaste for there to be a cap on (or off). In other words, the fight that we have with our significant other is *rarely* ever about the thing we thought it was. This was a very powerful lesson that I had to learn because I thought that I knew it all.

As it turns out, I knew hardly anything about what the real challenge was. But (like you) I was willing to learn, just not in those moments when triggered. With experience we now understand that people lash out for reasons deeper than we know.

The fight over the toothpaste cap is avoiding the real challenge that is happening and many times we are too close to a situation to see it for what it really is. In the case of my story, when my previous partner was staying out overnight at other people's houses that really affected me. What I couldn't see was that her just sleeping at home was frustrating for her. That was her perspective.

Because I chose not to be direct and face the challenge head-on I didn't get what I wanted. And since my Previous Partner chose not speak directly to me, she didn't get what she wanted. Yikes!

To avoid this atrocious mess we could have just had open, fair and calm communication. This would look something like not making anyone wrong or blaming anyone for whatever was happening at the time.

To resolve this mistake, practice radical honesty with your previous partner, mixed with self-expression to have your request be heard and understood. It might feel counter-intuitive at first, but just like releasing control that I talked about in Mistake #3, there is power in honesty.

### **Mistake #5: Not Allowing Emotional Cycles to Complete**

The fifth and final “learn from my mistake” is not allowing emotional cycles to complete. Or, said another way, getting “stuck” in an emotional cycle that hasn’t completed yet can really hold you back.

Before I get into details as to why I believe this to be important, something I didn’t know at the time was that this was even happening to me.

Let me define an emotional cycle as “the completion of a given emotion such that you feel it, it crests and then it goes away”.

We’ve all experienced this at many times in our lives. Sometimes we don’t even know it’s happening and what I wish that I had known at the time of my break-up was to have the personal wherewithal to understand that emotional waves come and go. More importantly I want to emphasize that an emotional cycle is designed complete, not to be stuck in.

As you can guess, if you get stuck at any of those parts - especially the “crest” section where it’s at it’s peak, it can cause more heartache and trouble for you down the road. And the trouble it causes might not be just emotional, but emotions are a good place to start.

The reality is that emotions are ephemeral. They come up, you process them and they go away. You are never in a perpetual state of happiness for more than a short amount of time, just like you aren’t in a ceaseless state of fear or a continual state of anxiety.

But what I did was get “stuck” at that crest during the breakup of my relationship.

I was stuck at that pinnacle of a very sad and angry emotional state such that I felt triggered constantly. This seeped into my dating life (when I was trying to get back into the dating scene) and even the way I treated my friends.

The best way to avoid this for yourself comes from Werner Erhard (the founder of EST and the Landmark Forum). He called the ability to handle these emotions as “experiencing the experience”. This is done by really owning the emotion and taking responsibility for it. You don’t do this by saying things like “you made me feel this way” or “when you did this thing it made me feel sad”.

Instead, you let the emotion come over you, you take personal responsibility by saying to yourself “I created this emotion” and really own that feeling.

And then finally, you just let it go.

What I couldn't see at the time (meaning that I was so out of touch that I had no idea it was even going on) was that my relationship was being threatened with contempt and resignation: Contempt in that I was feeling worthless and beneath considering. I felt this way not only personally but about our family situation as well. Resignation with what I perceived as my Previous Partner "giving up" on me and our family.

So, if an emotion starts to come up for you while you are reading this book, preparing to talk to your Previous Partner or you are working together on your Custody Agreement, remember to let it wash over you. Let it wash over you like a warm wave from the ocean. It's going to come, but it's also going to go away. The worst thing you could do is get stuck in that emotion to the point that it controls you.

## [How To Use This Book](#)

Okay, now that you know what not to do based on my mistakes, let's get into the real nuts-and-bolts of creating a Custody Agreement that is going to work for everyone.

We're going to look at this from three important perspectives - each one being an important step and must be completed before moving on.

Think of this as following a recipe for a creating a cake.

I'm not a baker, but I do know that in the hands of a skilled chef a handful of seemingly random ingredients being added together, mixed around and baked in an oven can create a masterpiece that looks great on the outside and tastes amazing in your mouth.

Sometimes those ingredients seem counter-intuitive to the outcome of a cake. After all, Eggs are runny and stinky and flour is white and powdery. None of those two things fit the picture of a "cake" that is in my head. Yet, under the *right conditions*, those ingredients work together to make something different than what we had before.

It's that exact idea of a "recipe" which is how I wrote this book.

We're going to start with the raw ingredients, which aren't very good by themselves.

This is the pain that we've got. This pain might be translated as the "what is so" for our current circumstance. We're all going to be in different places when we begin this journey together, but we all want the same thing as the outcome.

This could be pain from the relationship, the feeling of discomfort knowing that your children have to go through Parents breaking up or you personally mourning the loss of a family.

Then, like any good cake, we're going to take those ingredients and mix them together. We're going to throw in just the right amount of different things. This is going to be different for everyone involved, but stay with me because this is a critical step.

With those raw ingredients, some are going to be "need to haves" and some are going to be "nice to haves". This might mean that Christmas day is split up between two houses and only one set of Grandparents gets to see your kids. This might mean that you get the entire Summer with your kids and you can turn into a "Disneyland Dad". This might mean that you need to take your Co-Parents kids to school along with your own. There are many, many possibilities.

Then, once those ingredients are in place, we let them "bake". We're going to give our theoretical Custody Plan 30 days in the real world to see how it's going to work. At the end of the 30 days, we re-visit how things are going and make tiny adjustments as necessary.

As you can see, there are many different potential outcomes for baking this "masterpiece of a plan" called your Child Custody Agreement.

My point is that your case is personal.

Your case isn't going to look the same as mine. But there is a good chance that the outcome is going to be the same: Healthy kids, Co-Parents you can actually talk to and a Custody Agreement that is effortless to follow.

But the best part about this concoction we're creating is that you can control the ingredients. You can control what goes into your Custody agreement through your emotions, your words and your actions. On another level, you are going to control what goes into the plan through your language and your attitude as well. All of these are important aspects to creating something that is both powerful and long-term.

And if you don't make what you want clear to your Previous Partner, they aren't going to know.

In fact, I've found that no matter how much I know and love the person I'm talking to, I never assume that they know what I need (not just for a Custody Agreement, but for anything).

No matter how close you feel to them or how intimately you've known them in the past, they aren't mind-readers.

And neither are you.

Which is why we are setting out to make everything about this Custody Agreement as clear and transparent as possible.

In preparation for this, we want to very quickly get prepared to come up with a fair and simple-to-follow Custody agreement that is going to work for everyone.

In a brief overview, here is what this book is set up:

First, take care of the emotional side. Get than handled and under control.

The reason this is first is because it's important to get that out of the way so that you can look at situations logically and judiciously. You don't want to be mentally clouded or in a state of frustration when you are constructing your Custody agreement.

In the "emotional side" section, you are going to learn a trifecta of skills. More than likely you've learned these before or you might even be naturally good at them. Either way, these are *learned* skills that are going to benefit you outside of the context of your Custody Agreement and moreover are going to assist you in getting what you want.

These skills are (1) re-creating your Previous Partner, (2) the use of Empathy and how to really "walk in someone else's shoes" and (3) the art of flexibility.

If you can at least start to work on these three, you are going to have a solid foundation to create best Co-Parenting plan you can.

Second, you're going to create the actual plan based off of what you know about yourself, your Co-Parent and your kids. And really do your best to qualify this by asking questions where you don't know the answer. This might be to yourself, such as "*why is this emotion coming up for me when we talk about school?*" or perhaps from your Previous Partner as in "*what type of Medical Insurance does your job offer this year?*".

This will all make more sense in a moment once we get to those sections.



In those sections is where we create the plan itself. Yes, there is a checklist and yes there are definitions for each item. In this section there are 8 things we're going to clearly define and write out (or, rather, speak to the "listening" of you and your Co-Parent). These are going to be agreed upon and placed into a living, electronic document that is going to serve the purpose of defining what these mean for your Custody Agreement.

We're going to take on:

The Parenting Timetable - How much time you get with your child and how much time your Previous Partner gets with your child. This is the things many folks "go to" when they define their Custody Agreement, but as you are about to read this is one of 8 important categories that you will define.

Medical and Health Care - Who is going to pay for the medical, dental and vision insurance and handle setting up and going to take children to the doctor appointments.

Legal Responsibility - Who is going to be legally responsible for things like School contact information, driver's licenses and all the governmental and legal aspects.

Education and Extracurricular Activities - Where your child is going to attend school and what sports or art activities they are going to participate in.

Child Care - Who is going to take care of your child when you aren't able to, due to work, personal travel or previous engagements?

Exchanges - How are you going to drop-off or pick-up your child? Are there going to be exchanges at school pickup times or are you going to pick-up your children at your Previous Partners home? This category is going to be defined by what was chosen in the first category I mentioned called "Parenting Time Table".

Parental Guidelines - How you personally deal with things like alcohol and tobacco use in front of your child. Whom you are going to let sleep over or stay at your house when you have your child. These are the "adult" guidelines that you establish when your Child is in your care. As you are about to read, this category is really driven by integrity and honesty. Some Co-Parents are going to find this one easy and some are going to find it difficult, but it's an important one that shouldn't be overlooked.

Traveling and Relocating - How you are going to setup vacations or the requirement of moving to a different city.

I mention this here because these are the really specific things that you are going to include in your plan. While I do believe that it's important to do these steps in order, I want you to be thinking about which of those things I just listed are important to you and why.

Again, at this point, you are just thinking about these things because you have very little context around them right now. Trust me, we're going to dive in deep with each of these categories and it's going to happen through definitions and a series of questions you can ask yourself and your Co-Parent.

And, I totally get that it's your child - so each and every one of those is bound to have some sort of importance for you.

But if you had to pick and choose, which would be the one you had the most energy around?

Which one means the most to you and why? Maybe this is something you can quietly say to yourself right now as you prepare to dive into the first section, which is getting your emotional armour up to be able to take these questions on.

Again, just be thinking about these while you are moving on to my description of the third and fourth sections of this book.

In the third section you put that plan into action in the real world.

This is where the rubber really meets the road and it's during this phase when the real-world implementation begins.

And really, this is where the "work" starts because you are moving from the theoretical (as in the Custody Agreement that you made with your Co-Parent) to the practice of your Custody Agreement.

If you set up a good foundation and put forth your best effort in this "pre-work" than putting your plan into action will be no sweat.

The best part is that when the Custody Agreement is made with both Co-Parents, any integrity around the following through of this plan is built-in. A couple weeks into the plan it will feel like it was meant for you. If it doesn't and something seems "off" I've added a fourth section where you can begin to make adjustments.

Here's a brief overview of that section:

Fourth, you start adjusting the plan to your needs.

You'll start with small adjustments and make your way up to a routine that is going to work for everyone.

By the time you are ready to start tweaking your plan, you'll already have a sense of what works and what doesn't. Maybe it's going to be as simple as finding childcare for the Tuesday afternoon's you need to work or having a Spouse pick up your child from Softball practice.

You won't really know about what to fine-tune until you are in the full practice of your Custody Agreement, and that's to be expected.

So there you have it! That's what this book is all about. I've carefully written this book to be done in order, as each step intentionally adds to the next.

If you are like me, you like to read ahead and get to the real "good stuff". And I would encourage you to do that, if that's how you roll. After all, this book is about you and your life. But more importantly it's about your child's life and I believe that Parenting is one of the highest responsibilities one can take on.

So, on behalf of your child, I want to give my sincere gratitude and thank you for taking this on! You are about to embark on creating the foundation of a Custody Agreement that is going to work for everyone.

Here we go.

Let's start with YOU and the "emotional side" of setting up your Custody agreement.

If you are still feeling a twinge of discomfort about your Co-Parent or whatever situation lead you to creating a Custody Agreement outside of the court system, read the section below called "An Extraordinary Story With No Villains". You'll especially want to read that section if you are going through a breakup.

If you are feeling pretty good and strong about your relationship with your Co-Parent and are ready to dive in, skip to the first section called "Section 1: The Emotional Side". I've found that even if I think I'm prepared, there is another level I can elevate to in order to be fully armed with the emotional skills and self-esteem to take on just about anything. So let's do this!

## **An Extraordinary Story With No Villains**

At this point, you might probably “ravaged” by story. You might feel pretty low and down on yourself.

As you proceed into the next section I want to assure you that you are in the right place.

That isn’t meant to be a “woo-woo” statement and I’m certainly not belittling how you feel. I sincerely mean that you are “in the right place” because emotions and feelings often don’t lie - they simply reflect what is going on inside you.

I know because I’ve been there. I felt so empty inside, holding my daughter in my arms and wondering what had happened to my life. I was fearful of being alone and fearful that I wasn’t going to be the right father for my Daughter.

Even those negative feelings are okay because if they didn’t come up, you wouldn’t be able to process them.

And when you process them (which we’re going to talk about later in this book) you get power over them.

Alternatively, if you stay in a state of frustration there is a good chance that you are going to argue about your Custody Agreement and not be able to get it fully handled. That’s why getting this pain of a breakup under control is going to benefit everyone in your situation.

To be ultra-clear: I’m not asking you to “get over it”. That’s too broad of a step and that’s going to be an abstract definition of “getting over it”. I want you to just “be” with it, even if it’s just a short period of time.

So, rather than dwell in the “story” of what happened and what *might* have happened, let’s take a look at the reality of your situation.

Let’s take a look at “what is so” - meaning we aren’t going to project any story or meaning into our situation and look at it for what it truly is.

I’m going to guide you through some helpful “facts” about your breakup.

And even though I’m calling these “facts” they are really just perspectives to keep in mind. These are the things I wish that someone would have talked to me about when I was going through a tough time during a Partner breakup.

These perspectives aren’t anything new to you, I’m sure, but sometimes just reading them again is a good and helpful reminder to assist you getting through times of trial:

### **Fact #1: People and Circumstance Change**

No one stays the same forever. Even if you make a life-long commitment to another person in marriage, that doesn’t mean they aren’t going to change as a person.

Did they break their integrity around their word? Yes, they did. And this does happen.

Does it feel good? No, it probably doesn’t.

As we traverse through life, things we desire and want change.

Along with this change of desire becomes a change in priorities.

It's human nature for change and if we didn't evolve, we'd still be wearing acid-washed jeans and rock t-shirts from when we were teenagers.

But rather than examine the "other person" in your situation, take a look at yourself. Were there places in your marriage or your relationship with your Previous Partner where you broke your word? Did you perhaps withhold something from them? Did you break an agreement that you had around work, your kids, your house, money or sexuality?

What are the things you can take responsibility for where you broke your word?

For me, it was withholding information about a bank account that I'd setup outside of our shared checking account. I justified this as "being only about business", but it was something that I intentionally withheld from her during our breakup. In hindsight, I kept this to myself out of fear. Looking back, it's hard for me to remember why I was afraid, but my best guess is that I justified it as something that was only for me. The reason why I call this withholding is because we'd made the agreement that we were going to have a single checking account and I broke our understanding around that.

The reality is that we all break our word. It's just part of life and it's unavoidable being a human.

But that doesn't mean that we need to live into a place where that is something hanging over our heads.

People change and circumstances change. It's just the way life works.

This book is going to help you not only set up a Custody Agreement that works for you, but also give you "mental and emotional" armour that you can put on to withstand the arrows that the world flings at you.

It's my hope that these emotional skills are going to assist you when integrity does get broken and when people change so that you can view it as just "what happened" and not live into the past about it.

## **Fact #2: Life Is A Series of Choices & Everything Is Temporary**

Your life, including your current circumstances, is occurring in this moment based on the choices you've made.

Some choices you've made are pretty good and some choices you've made, well, they weren't so good.

If you want to really cut-to-the-chase, the perspective to take on is: *If you don't like your current circumstances than change them.*

I totally understand that this is much easier to say outloud than it is to practice in the real-world.

And I'm not mentioning this out of tough love, with the expectation you change everything about your life NOW (although there is no better time than now for change).

But this entire book is devoted to changing your current circumstances and making them exceptional at the same time.

We're going to do this gradually, as any lasting change should be done.

I can tell you this, just by getting a copy of this book, reading it and putting together a Custody Agreement that works is going to free up a ton of "mental bandwidth" for you. If you are like me, sometimes even defining something by typing it into a screen or writing it on a piece of paper can make it "real". But you are going to do much more than just define a few categories.

I get into this a little later on, but I think it's fitting to mention it now. As you get older you get wiser - wisdom being a mixture of experience and action. Being wiser than you were before means that you make different choices than you did in the past. By making different choices you then get a different set of circumstance that make up your life.

The idea to keep in mind is: You got what you've got and, more importantly, you don't got what you don't got.

And this, again, is something to "be" with. It's not good, it's not bad, it's just "what is so".

How do you go about changing your circumstances from this moment forward?

If you see another happy couple, bless them and be thankful that they are happy. After all, *that's going to be you some day*.

If you see a Parent at the park on the verge of crying because their child isn't listening to what they are asking them to do, think of that fondly because *soon that child is going to be grown and won't want to go to the park anymore*.

If you get jealous of a friend because they got a raise at work remember that someday you're going to get a new job and it's going to be *more satisfying and better paying than the one you've got now*.

This method of perspective shifting helps you realize that life is nothing but choices and that everything has a cycle. The cycle begins, you go through it and the cycle ends.

Just remember everything in life is temporary. Just like you don't stay in a constant state of happiness all the time, you can't stay in a constant state of fear or anxiety.

Some people show up and play the "starring role" in your life. Maybe you are married to them for 40 years while others show up for a couple dates and that's the end of your relationship with them.

It's entirely possible to learn how to be emotionally healthy and happy. Which is a perfect segue into the next "fact", which is learning anything takes practice. This includes the skills of perspective shifting that I just mentioned.

### **Fact #3: Learning Anything Takes Practice**

You couldn't shoot three-pointers in your first Basketball game when you were in second grade and you couldn't parallel park your Dad's truck the first day you drove.

Learning takes time. In fact, learning anything takes time, patience and practice.

Do not let your now defunct relationship with your previous partner overwhelm you.

There isn't a manual about how to have a strong relationship out there that we're given when we have our first kiss.

There isn't a checklist or a boilerplate template for the perfect marriage.

It just doesn't exist.

And because it doesn't exist, it's something we need to learn.

We learn through reading (like you are doing now), we learn through observation and we learn through taking action. I've found the cycle of Imitate -> Assimilate -> Innovate repeats itself time and time again, in many aspects of my life: Romantic Partners, Business Partners and even in learning skills and being exposed to new technologies.

Many times, when we take action we screw up. It's a rare occasion that someone hits a homerun the first time they are up to bat. I'm sure that you didn't marry the first person you went out on a date with.

But at least you are putting some sort of action behind it.

The way we put action behind our thoughts is to learn a new behavior.

Remember that behavior is a response to stimulus.

And unlike innate behaviors which are inherited and usually performed correctly the first time, like breathing and sleeping, anything "outside of yourself" must be learned.

The same principle applies to learning how to hit a tennis ball as it does having a lasting marriage. This isn't my attempt to cheapen marriage, I wouldn't do that. My point is that marriage is a skill that is learned.

Think about all the "learned behavior" you've had in your life. It sounds a little unimpressive to us now, but think about how big of a breakthrough it was to write your first and last name together. You had to coordinate your eyes, your hands and your brain to do this task, which probably felt monumental and even perhaps stressful at the time.

You see, this is normal.

I know that if your breakup was recent, you might not feel "normal" - especially right now. But I assure you that this feeling will pass.

And we're going to talk directly about those feelings and how they do end up going away.

I want to assure you that this is an ordinary story with no villains. Yes, ordinary.

What happened, happened and what didn't happen, didn't happen.

There are no "good guys" and there are no "bad guys".

There are only people who are trying their best to make parenting, relationship and raising children work.

You love your child, your Co-Parent loves your child and your child loves both of you. In fact, you are the most important person in your child's life.

There are no "sides".

Which is why we're going to make yours an EXTRAordinary story.  
And it starts with you and your emotions.



## Section 1: The Emotional Side

Emotions help us connect to ourselves. More importantly, emotions help us understand other humans.

Emotions do this in various ways and if you know how to interpret your own emotions, you are going to be able to understand yourself and others in a more deep and profound way.

Remember when I mentioned “learned behavior” in the introduction part of “An Extraordinary Story With No Villains”?

Well, that’s what we’re going to learn about in this section.

The reason we’re taking on emotions first is to lay the foundation for getting the best “you” ready for working with your Previous Partner.

And while having the emotional aspects under control doesn’t seem like it fits into creating a Child Custody plan, let me assure you that it plays an essential role.

It’s so essential that I wish I’d had a better handle on my emotions when I created my own Custody Agreement.

It’s also the most difficult of all of the things you need to do to get a good plan in place, which might not be clear on the surface but please bare with me.

If you really take this section to heart and follow the advice I offer, it’s going to pay off for you not only in creating your Custody Agreement but in just about every aspect of your life.

I really want what’s best for your child and you. There is no one that I’ve ever encountered who wasn’t “cleaned-up” with their Ex-Partner that was able to have a successful custody plan in place that offered flexibility and was a “win-win” for both families.

What we’re going to do is a deeper dive into the emotional side of this by learning a few new skills and then putting those skills into place as leverage for us.

The skills we are going to learn in this section are:

**How to Recreate Your Previous Partner** - How to make interactions with your Previous Partner more comfortable by “coming from nothing” and really leaving the “old person” behind when you communicate with them.

I used this exercise probably a hundred times when I felt like punching someone in the face. Needless to say, no one got hurt after I learned how to do this. I want to assure you that it’s entirely possible to re-create people as someone new and this part of Section 1 will explain details and offer practice exercises that are easy to follow.

**Empathy** - The skill of having Empathy is essential for really understanding someone. In this section I give you three exercises that you can immediately start using to have empathy for *anyone*, but I really would suggest working on this in skill in relation to your Previous Partner.

The reason this understanding is so important is because you can (literally) feel the way they do. And when you feel the way you do, it's easier to predict their behavior and be able to speak to them in a way that they will deeply understand. This is important because it allows you to be able to be expressive and understood.

**Flexibility** - The only thing that is certain when you start a new phase in life is that things are going to go amiss at some point. As you know from your experience, it's not a matter of if, but a matter of when. It might be frustrating and confusing, but it doesn't have to be. Learning a different perspective of flexibility is going to allow you to "roll with the punches", which hopefully aren't real punches.

Learning flexibility, like empathy, can help in all aspects of life but within the context of your Custody plan, it's an essential skill that is going to pay off time and time again as you fine-tune your future family plan.

## **Re-Creating Your Previous Partner Podcast Excerpt**

[The following section is an excerpt from one of my “Co-Parent Courage” Podcast episodes. I chose to leave the introduction in this part because it sets the context for what I’m about ready to dive into. It’s not long, but if you want to skip it please jump to “Recreating Your Previous Partner as a Co-Parent”].

One of the things I value above everything in my life is my children. My kids are awesome, and I’m sure that you think your kids are awesome too.

Kids provide a level of self-awareness and deep love that is unmatched by any relationship, job, money or value created in the world. Children are unique in that perspective and if you are listening to this Podcast (reading this book), chances are you are a Parent.

There is also a good chance that you can relate to the way I feel about my kids, in that they are the most amazing thing to ever happen to me.

And just because things didn’t work out between you and your previous partner, it doesn’t mean that your children have to grow up with pain in their lives.

As adults, we know that life is hard enough to deal with even without the added stress of bickering Parents or uncomfortable situations. Quite contrary to that, even with divorced parents or parents who share custody of children, the kids can still thrive on love, understanding and an environment of security and comfort.

Regardless of your situation, the fact remains that you are, on some level, a family. Maybe not a family that eats dinner together every night or even that gets along well, but anyone sharing custody and responsibility together is, to some degree, a family.

### **Don’t Make It Complex**

Relationships are funny things because in many contexts we have a series of unspoken rules to follow. You know, *we don’t spit when we’re on the school playground, we don’t cuss at church and we don’t typically take our shoes and socks off in a restaurant*. I say that in jest, but I’m actually serious about the unspoken rules we have with each other.

Unfortunately many of these unspoken rules occur in the context of relationships, especially when it comes to romantic ones. And like most things, they start off where we don’t care about the unspoken rules, we’re just happy to be with another human being that feels the same way we do. But as time goes by, those rules become more and more important to us.

I’ve found in my experience that those unspoken rules can either strengthen a relationship or erode it, and both can happen painfully slow. The key to using those rules to bolster a relationship is to communicate them as directly as possible.

Those “unspoken” rules might even be one of the potentially many reasons you and your Previous Partner aren’t together any longer - an unspoken rule was broken. Then you talked about it and maybe it got broken again... or one of you’d just had enough and it was over. At this point, it doesn’t matter because you aren’t together anymore.

Let's do our best to not make this complex. You see, when you start to share custody, the unspoken rules suddenly become relevant. Not only do they become relevant, but they become a focus. And that's just the first step. The real difficulty comes in sticking to the integrity of your situation and providing a space that is flexible, but yet honors our words and communication.

I remember feeling super frustrated when a time for a drop-off was overlooked or when my daughter showed up for school late.

But that's just life.

I certainly am not suggesting that it was okay, that's not what I'm saying.

I'm saying that "what is so" is that my kid was late to school and it was out of my control. It doesn't mean that it wasn't stressful for me at the time, it certainly was, but rather than thinking about it as a **challenge**, I chose to think about it as an **opportunity**. An opportunity to practice Empathy and to "be with" her lateness.

### **Recreating Your Previous Partner as a Co-Parent**

Let's talk about the power that comes from recreating someone and why it's an essential skill to have when negotiating with your Previous Partner.

And what I mean by recreating someone is to have them arrive for you not as someone who comes with baggage or someone who is the person you knew in the past.

Rather, literally re-create them as a New Person so that we can experience love and joy with them, regardless of what they've done in the past.

This is especially powerful when it comes to your Previous Partner because you are going to need to interact with them for the rest of your life. So, why not enjoy it instead of "having to tolerate" them?

One thing that really helped me was re-creating my Previous Partner. Every time I saw her I pretended she was a "new person".

What I really mean by this is that I purposely pushed out the negativity and sorrow that was associated with seeing her and replaced it with someone who loved my child and cared for my kids welfare. At that time, the hardest part was extracting any sort of romantic notion, which I'll talk about in a moment (and why I am spending so much time in the Emotional Section).

Since you don't know all of my story yet, I can totally admit to you that this took over a year to actually *work*. Yes, it works, but it's not instant by any stretch of the imagination.

And it wasn't always perfect either, so for example, she would come by the house and be angry about my daughter's attitude or about a paper she brought home from school. I could tell, just based off of her body language and tone of voice that she was ready for a fight.

At that point, when someone approaches you already in a mood or on a malicious mission, the chemicals are already squirting around in their brain and there is little you are going to do to calm them down in the moment. This is a critical sign that you should temporarily back off.

When I had a negative thought cross my mind I replaced it with a different one.

This was incredibly difficult to do at first, and really took some serious effort on my part but, just like the pain of a breakup, it eventually dissipated until it was all gone. And what I had left was “choice”.

I was left with the capacity to *choose* her as she was. This gave me power. Not power over her, but the power within myself to be able to deal with her straight and make requests that, given other circumstances, would be difficult to ask her.

And I was also left with the ability to choose her in that moment.

This is very powerful on many levels and it’s something that I want to share with you. Re-creating someone is really is one of the best gifts you can give yourself and your Previous Partner when setting up your Child Custody Agreement.

### **Exercise 1: Throwing The Image Away**

There is a really great exercise in Neuro Linguistic Programming that I used after I’d have a less-than-fun interaction with my Previous Partner. This isn’t necessarily a thing you can do in the moment, but I have to say that in the times I was attempting to quiet my mind, especially right after the break-up, it was very helpful.

The exercise goes like this:

Choose a moment that happened where you had an interaction with your Previous Partner. I had a tendency to choose “bad” moments, mostly because there weren’t many good moments during our breakup.

Take the moment when you feel the most intense, like the moment you want to do damage to another person just because you are frustrated or you feel unheard.

Then freeze it.

Just like a snapshot or a screenshot from a video, take the movement and literally stop it in your mind.

Slowly extract the color from it so that it become black and white and you are left with just a “vintage” looking image of the situation you chose.

Then, in your mind, crinkle up that picture into a ball of photo paper and throw it into the river. Like, actually see yourself at the edge of a river or on a bridge throwing that paper into the water below.

This might sound relatively simple, and it is. This is part of the beauty of this exercise.

But it’s also a really powerful exercise that helps you re-frame situations and see them for what they are. It puts you in control of something you normally don’t have control over. But more importantly, it gives you the mental wherewithal to know that ultimately you are responsible for your emotions and thoughts.

After all, those thoughts are just moments and something in that moment just happened. The moment might temporarily make you sad or happy, or you might feel nothing, but the important takeaway is that it’s just a thought.

Because thoughts and feelings are ephemeral and we have the ability to choose our reaction to thoughts, I was free to choose whatever I wanted to.

I choose her and by choosing her, I chose her actions.

I chose my daughter being late for school, I chose having to buy school uniforms for my daughter and having to pay late fees on her school lunch tab... all that comes with it.

I know it's easy for me to sit behind a desk and tell you to "choose" someone whom you probably disagree with and someone who probably pushes your buttons.

But it's you who is going to take a high-road and it's you who is in the bigger person.

You see, when you choose someone for whom they are, you are the one that is in control. It's powerful and it might even sound counter-intuitive to play a hero in your mind, but it works. And once you see the full potential of this, you'll be glad you took this exercise on.

Now that you have the ability to remove the visual, let's move on to helping you with the auditory.

Let's take on that little voice in your head.

### **Exercise 2: Disappearing The Voice**

Another really great exercise that helps with recreating someone is to *replace* the voices in your head that come up when you are around them or think about them.

That voice in your head is the voice that passes judgements and often has a reaction that is virtually instantaneous whenever it gets triggered. Like I mentioned before, it could be when you are around that other person, when you think about them or even when you see something that reminds you about them.

Landmark Education calls those voices "Automatic Recurring Dialogue" and Dr. Daniel Aman calls these "Automatic Negative Thoughts". Both of those are great descriptions of what I'm talking about here.

Something I also learned in Landmark is "if your internal voice is *saying 'what internal voice?'* then that's it talking to you..."

You're intimately familiar with this automatic process, even though you may not have ever named that voice before.

We all have it and it's something that we need to confront head-on.

Before I go any deeper, let's first look at what is so when this occurs:

You had a thought and that thought released chemicals into your brain.

Those chemicals cause a reaction in your self-talk and suddenly things take on a different meaning.

Here's some examples of what I mean:

"Can you pick up the dry cleaning" turns into "*You take me for granted.*"

"I'm going to be home late from work" turns into "*You don't care about me.*"

"I like my idea better" turns into "*You're arrogant & think only about yourself.*"

“I’m going to a movie with my friend” turns into “*You don’t love me.*”

These thoughts are automatic and they happen because you are human.

While you can’t control this automatic thinking and internal voice that happen to you, you can control your reaction to them.

This is a critical piece to understand because we can do exercises until the cows come home but until you apply it in your real-life (and in real-time) you won’t know the benefits that this can have when it comes to recreating someone powerfully in your life.

The first distinction is to recognize the difference between an observation and a judgement.

And this is done, again, in language.

An observation is a remark, statement, or comment based on something one has seen, heard, or noticed.

A judgement is the ability to make considered decisions or come to conclusions about someone or something.

Be on the lookout for judgement talk in the form of these words:

**Always** - e.g. “She’s always late”

**Everyone** - e.g. “Everyone hates my new hat”

**Never** - e.g. “She will never learn higher level math”

**No One Ever Will** - e.g. “No one ever will get what my book is about”

Be on the lookout for when these particular words come up for you because they are a sure sign that you might be making up a story about someone or some event.

And not just these four, but words that judge others, yourself and especially your Ex-Partner. Once you start thinking about this more, you’ll be able to quickly hear those words in the language you speak to yourself and the words you hear from others.

The best way to master this, not just in recognition but in practice, is to disappear some automatic recurring self-talk.

Here is an exercise to help you do this in the privacy of your own brain:

**First, reproduce the content** - This is the language that was actually said. You can include gestures and physical actions if that was part of it. For example, thinking about someone folding their arm or rolling their eyes. Make sure you do this if that really did happen.

As a bonus, you might want to ask yourself “*what did I make this mean?*” - Often it’s not obvious, but worth the time to consider.

**Second, repeat the content** - Each time you repeat what was said, it loses its power. Repeat it over and over again, let’s give it a good 10 times and eventually by the end of the 10th time it will sound silly and even perhaps ridiculous.

**Third, replace the content** - Now that you have power over what was said, replace the content with something closer to what is so. And what I mean by suggesting this is that you replace the original words and gestures with what was really happening at the time.

We're doing all this so that we can "come from nothing". Like I mentioned before, the way to really recreate your Previous Partner is to start on a level playing field with them. This is why disappearing a negative voice is so important to being able to have empathy.

Here's an example:

My previous partner was frustrated about a grade in Life Science that my daughter got on a report card. As I recall, she went from a "B" to a "D". This isn't typical of my daughter because she usually does well in School and this was the only subject where there was a decline in her grades.

She said to me: *"You never pay attention to her (your daughter's) work! This is why she got bad grades"*.

In privacy, I repeat this back to myself and by the 7th or 8th time it starts to sound silly. In fact, it sounded like my Previous Partner was deflecting or almost victimizing to herself.

I recognized the deflection in "you" and the judgement talk of "never".

I then stop myself and remind myself what is so: My daughter's grade went down in one subject.

I then replace this (or "reframe it") by stating the fact:

*She got a D in Life Science*

And then I replaced the language with:

*I will help her try harder by looking at her homework before she hands in it.*

As you can see, it's pretty simple to disarm the power of the original conversation. Before I had this skill I would have made myself feel bad about her grade, rather than change the language to make it not mean something else.

Let's try another example:

This time it's not about me and it's something I heard in my daughter's language.

My daughter comes home from school one day and complains that some kids were mean to her on the playground. They made fun of her because her pants were too big and draped over her shoes, which also gave her a hard time in P.E. class.

She said: *"Everyone laughed at me for wearing these pants today. I am never going to wear these pants again and no one will ever forget how I looked."*

I repeat this to my daughter eight or nine times and by the time I get to the 9th iteration she is laughing and grinning.

I see the victim language of "everyone", "I am never" and "no one will ever".

I then defined it further for her:

"Who is everyone?" I ask. To which she replies "Izzy and Naomi".

I then gave her some perspective: "Okay, so really only 2 girls. 2 girls that are your friends, right?".



She nodded yes.

I then assure her that if she doesn't want to wear the pants again she doesn't have to, but if that's the case we need to donate them to a kid that will wear them.

I ask her "Okay, so if it's just Izzy and Naomi, do you really think they are going to forget about those pants when you show up at school tomorrow? Especially if you *aren't* wearing them?"

She shook her head "yes".

Finally, I reframed it for her with what is so:

*Some friends laughed at you because you wore pants that were too big for you. Let's make sure that you only wear pants to school that fit you properly from now on.*

She agreed.

So there is your second exercise to Recreate your Previous Partner: Reproduce, Repeat and Replace the language that triggers your automatic listening.

Obviously my second example was with another person but it was just as good of an example of a re-frame. And since we both have children, I wanted to share with you the real influence that our brain has over our listening.

So, as you can see, what you think about actually shapes your life. And it does it in a very literal way.

Now that you've got an auditory and a visual exercise to get you on the path to emotional recovery you are one step closer to creating the best Custody Agreement you can. Let's take this to another level and discuss Empathy.

Understanding yourself is important, but understanding someone else is essential to your Custody Agreement becoming a long-term success.

## **Empathy Experience: The Apathy Antidote**

Sometimes I treat other people unfairly based on how I expect them to show-up.

And by “show-up” what I really mean is how I expect them to react or behave.

Typically, this is based on how they’ve acted in the past and there really is no excuse for this behavior on my part.

I would consider this just being a “bad habit” as a human.

I also don’t think that I’m alone in doing this because, as humans, it’s easy to let the past seep into the present and affect the way we perceive others.

The biggest offense I’ve done is to treat my Previous Partner unfairly.

Sometimes I justify it by taking their past and putting into my present, which is incredibly unfair to them.

In fact, I’d go so far as to say that I’ve even felt apathy about my Co-Parenting situation at times. If anyone has experienced this like I have, it’s a pretty depressing and sad place to be.

However, the good news is that it doesn’t need to be that way.

There is a skill I learned a long time ago that is the “cure” for Apathy and it’s almost like an antibiotic you can mentally use to counteract those negative thoughts and attitudes towards some else, especially your Previous Partner, but really anyone you choose.

It takes work, no doubt about that, but the payoff is a big one.

I’ve used this skill in my life a lot, even in business & with my kids. But with an Ex-Partner it’s almost a magical formula.

This magical formula is having empathy.

So, what is Empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Sometimes Empathy gets confused or collapsed into Sympathy or even Charity.

And it’s important to clearly define this because if we’re going to learn the skill of Empathy we should really know what it is.

But let’s start with what it’s not.

Empathy is not sympathy.

Sympathy is feeling compassion, sorrow, or pity for the hardships that another person encounters.

And even on this level: *sympathy* is when you share the feelings of another; *empathy* is when you understand the feelings of another but do not necessarily share them.

Sometimes Empathy gets confused with Charity.

Charity is the voluntary giving of help.

So, you don't really experience empathy by giving something away.

Empathy is really a state of taking on. You take on someone else's feelings when you practice empathy.

Of course, if we *don't* adhere to this, we get apathy - which we don't want to do because Apathy by definition isn't feeling anything at all.

Rather, apathy is a result of emotional grot building up inside our well being. Apathy is literally giving up and pretty much resigned to a person being how they show up.

Once we hit apathy, it's a difficult road to recovery. I only know this because I've been there before in my life.

That's what we want to avoid because when we feel apathetic we aren't going to help ourselves, let alone be able to help anyone else in our life.

So, back to Empathy.

To really take on someone else's feelings try to imagine what it's like for them.

With my Previous Partner, she is a single Mom and I am married. There's a big difference right there.

So, anything related to my daughter she's got to do herself, whereas I may have support at home.

She's also single, so there is another layer where we are different. If she doesn't have the emotional feedback of a relationship than she is really on her own.

With just this tiny little bit of context in mind, I have to ask myself questions as I'm talking to her:

*Maybe she had a rough day at work and is cranky because of that.*

*Perhaps she unintentionally skipped a meal and is hungry, but not even conscious of that (this happens to me sometimes too).*

*Maybe a date ended poorly or didn't finish the way she expected.*

There could be many things that are in misalignment with her that could be causing external conflict.

Of course, those examples are just conjecture on my part and could be a runaway, so to speak, for being able to have Empathy for her.

As I've mentioned several times, rarely is the thing that we focus on the core of any challenge.

And let me pause for a moment here. This isn't just my Ex-Partner or your Previous Partner.

Everyone, *all of us*, are affected by things that we don't even know are affecting us.

And the reality is that I have a relationship with my Ex-Partner such that if there was something that was greatly concerning her, she would mention it.

The real point with Empathy is to *feel* the way the other person does and to *really* “*take on*” what they are feeling.

And the day-to-day reality of this is powerful in the sense that it forces you to be relatable.

So, how do you learn the skill of Empathy?

I’m going share three exercises that I’ve gathered over the years that have helped me learn to be more empathetic. Said another way, these skills have allowed me to step inside the shoes (and mind) of another human in order to really understand them emotionally.

The first exercise is called “reverse engineering”.

### **Empathy Exercise 1: Reverse Engineering**

Think of someone you’d like to understand—this will work for anyone: Your Co-Parent, your Previous Partners, your boss, someone you are physically attracted to or a friend.

Remember a recent interaction you had with this person—especially one that left you baffled as to how they were really feeling.

Now imitate, as closely as you can, the physical posture, facial expression, exact words, and vocal inflection they used during that encounter.

Notice what emotions arise within you.

What you feel will probably be very close to whatever the other person was going through.

While this is all done inside you and your mind, this skill is like a “secret weapon” to understanding others on a deep and profound level.

Armed with the emotion that person was feeling, you can now adjust your language, attitude or demeanor to match was is appropriate to them.

“Reverse Engineering” is the first exercise.

Here’s another one that I really enjoy called “shape shifting”.

### **Empathy Exercise 2: Shape Shifting**

In this exercise you think about instantaneously switching bodies with someone whom you are wanting to feel empathy with.

You might have to channel your inner child for this (or at least a little imagination). If you can do this one right it’s probably the most powerful of the three exercises I’m sharing with you.

Close your eyes and ask yourself the question: What if I woke up in someone else’s body? What if I woke up as my Ex-Partner this morning?

What sort of fears would I have and how would I cope with them?

Am I calmly getting ready for work or am I rushed and feeling anxious?

Am I thinking about something that is going to happen in the future or am I stuck in thoughts about past experiences?

Then, ask yourself the most important question of all: *What would I do next?*

This will really get you inside the head of the person you are using to experience empathy for.

Like I mentioned, this takes a bit of work. But when you can really imagine, or even shape-shift, into someone else you can really benefit by feeling them on an emotional level like no other.

Our third and last exercise for Empathy is called “Learning to Listen”.

### **Empathy Exercise 3: Learning to Listen**

One thing that is incredibly personal is your story.

Based on the two exercises I just mentioned, you will naturally become a better storyteller the more you do these exercises and the more you start to understand others using Empathy.

After all, stories are really how us humans relate to each other.

By now, you can see a thread connecting what really happened (which I often call “what is so”) and the stories about what we *think* really happened.

Have you ever asked someone how they were and you didn’t believe them? Maybe you didn’t believe them based on their body language, facial expression or their demeanor?

So, the example of you asking someone with a sad face “how things are going” and they say “fine”, you know that isn’t the right answer for them.

Then, you ask them again: “No, really. How are you?”

Wait for them to respond and really listen to them.

And ask a third time if necessary, until you get an honest answer where they seem genuine and authentic. This is really the magic of understanding and learning to listen to someone else.

This isn’t to advise or protect them, rather to provide a warm space of genuine caring to them.

Once someone opens up, they will share their story with you and this way you can get a better understanding of them. By getting that deeper understanding, you can put yourself into their circumstances but also provide the space of being able to listen from a place of non-judgement.

So, there you have it. Three exercises in Empathy to get you on the fast track to being able to really discern how another person is feeling.

And the great news is that you have a Co-Parent with whom you can start experimenting with immediately.

With this in hand, you can really help other people and this is a skill that gets sharper and sharper over time.

Now I'd like to introduce the third pillar of getting our emotional health really cookin'.  
It's flexibility.

## **The Importance of Flexibility**

As you start to really put into practice the skill of re-creating your Ex-Partner and you're starting to explore the power of Empathy, there is a third skill that is the "trifecta" of getting the emotional side of your life handled.

This next skill is the skill of Flexibility.

Flexibility is the extent to which a person can cope with changes in circumstances and think about challenges and tasks in creative ways. This trait is often used when stressors or unexpected events occur. Sometimes this requires a person to change their stance, outlook or commitment.

Wow, that certainly is a mouthful, isn't it?

More importantly, you can probably see, without much direction from me, how being flexible can benefit your Co-Parenting situation, especially when it comes to setting up your long-term custody agreement.

Now that we've talked about re-creating your Previous Partner as a Courageous Co-Parent, someone whom you share a tremendous amount of responsibility with... And how you can use Empathy to understand them on a deep and profound level... we're now going to take on the skill of flexibility with three easy points to remember.

The flexibility skill can be learned by practicing the following:

1. **Think before you speak** (choosing your words carefully and conveying them in a way that isn't defensive).
2. **Make Plans In Advance and Share Them** (since so much of your custody agreement is going to be based around responsibility, it's critical that you are clear about your plans with your Previous Partner).
3. **Be Direct, But Discrete** (saying what you are going to say in a way that "lands" for your Previous Partner. Never doing this in a combative or personal way, rather just being direct and honest).

### **Think Before You Speak**

Remember that old INXS song called "Devil Inside"? One of the lyrics I remember from that song was: "Words are weapons, shoving lies".

Words really can be weapons. And like any responsible gun-owner will tell you, it's important to be cautious and know how to use your weapon.

This doesn't mean that you need to have a silver tongue and say all the "right" things.

Rather, it means that being clear and saying what you really think is going to be important. However, it's really in the way you say them. I remember reading a statistic that a bunch of scientists came up with that said that 38% of our communication isn't the words we choose but the way we choose to say them.

Then, in addition to that, 55% of our communication is body language.

This means that a whopping 93% of our communication is nonverbal.

So, if voice tone and body language make up that much of our communication we need to be very careful with our words.

Here's a good example of the difference in intent versus impact.

“Hey Megan, it's a little awkward for me to approach you about this, but I heard you said X. I don't know if it's true or not. Regardless, I thought I would come to you because I'm pretty upset and I thought we should talk about it.”

As you can tell, this focus isn't on blaming the person (“Megan”), but really airing your feeling and trying to get a resolution. What you're really saying is “I want to understand what happened so that we can have a conversation about it.”

If Megan got defensive, you can point out that you aren't questioning her intent: “I'm not talking about what you intended. I thought I would clear the air rather than be fuming about it. Would you agree that is better?”

Here's another example.

What if you had to choose your words carefully when you had some bad news? Hopefully this don't come up in your Co-Parenting life, but it just might in the future.

This also is an example of getting directly to the point and taking responsibility.

“I have some bad news to share that I'm not proud of. I should've told you sooner, but here's where we are...”

You then describe the situation and offer up a solution: “These are my ideas about how we might address this. What are your thoughts?”

If it was indeed you that made the mistake, make sure that you own up to it and not try to point out the reasons why you did it. Those aren't that important and allows you to keep the conversation as “what is so”.

### **Make Plans In Advance and Share Them**

Even if pre-planning things isn't something that you are used to, try to make an effort to make everyone involved aware of what you are planning on doing.

This cuts down on surprises, and even if you are someone who like surprises there is a chance that your Previous Partner might not be the same way.

I've found that this is especially true when it comes to changing exchange times or location.

When you share your plans, even just the ideas of plans, it allows you to be more transparent. This lands nicely when you are getting ready to come up with a Custody Plan that is going to work. In other words, this is something to put into practice now in preparation for the day you sit down to create your Plan.

### **Be Direct, But Be Discrete**

What I really mean to say here is to not “beat around the bush”. Be direct with your request and be ready to accept an answer that you might not want to hear.



If the answer is “no” remember that “no” means “no for now”. That answer might change in the future, but for now we need to respect “no”.

Once someone is able to see your point of view or really absorb your perspective, there is a chance that they might practice some flexibility with you and change their answer from “no” to “yes”.

No one is a mind-reader and if you don't make your request sincerely or clearly, than almost always the answer will default to “no”.

This is simply the case because the vast majority of people in our culture are terrified of change. Put into that the equation the fact that you are working on a long-term custody agreement for the care and well-being of your child and many people will default to being defensive.

So, be direct and clear with the added bonus of being able to accept any answer given.

## **Our Emotional Journey Wrap-Up**

You've just been exposed to the emotional elements that I found incredibly useful in my own journey.

And 'journey' is a good word because even if you end up becoming a master of these three essentials, there are plenty of other emotional components that are going to help you not only with your life as a Co-Parent, but in many other aspects as well.

When we recreate someone we really see them as a person. We see them as "whole, perfect and complete" the way they are. We don't sit in judgement of them or criticize them, we openly accept them.

This might sound a little "woo-woo", and if it does that's okay. When you've had a chance to road-test these exercises for yourself, you'll see what I mean.

Once we recreate our Previous Partner, we provide them with the gift of Empathy.

Empathy being a skill that you develop that lets you deep inside the experience of another human. When you really understand them you can't help but speak to the listening that works for them.

Finally, we wrap it all in Flexibility. We literally create the ability to be flexible: In our listening, in our words and in our being. We learn to say what we want to say and we choose the answer given.

I hope that along the way of getting exposed (and perhaps re-exposed) to these emotional pieces that you've been working mentally with your Previous Partner in mind.

I know that as I was writing this I almost has no choice but to run my Previous Partner through this filter. I would go back to the times I wished that I'd recreated her, used empathy as a real tool and certainly wished I'd been more flexible with her.

Take a moment to really relax and use your mind to imagine how these skills are going to help you.

And when I say "skills", I really mean it. These are skills where you gain the aptitude and knowledge required for calm & clear communication. Once you put these into practice you'll start to see results almost immediately.

You are a quarter of the way to getting the custody agreement you want. I know that working on yourself first might not make sense, but I want to thank you for sticking with me on this one. Like I mentioned before, getting your strongest "self" together before starting your custody plan is going to get you the best results possible.

Let's get on with it and start Planning and Creating your Co-Parenting Custody Agreement.

## **Section 2: Planning and Creating Your Custody Agreement**

## Let's Be Practical

Okay, with the emotional side handled it's now time to get into the plan itself.

Remember that we want to “speak to the listening” of what works for you and what works for your Co-Parent.

So, for example, I am a very analytical and introverted guy. I like to see things written and I like to write. So, a written plan works best for me.

My Previous Partner (the Co-Parent to my child) is very auditory and extroverted. This means that we're going to talk and communicate directly about very specific things.

As this conversation about your Custody Agreement starts, much of your communication is going to feel like reporting (“*Is her Green Sweatshirt in your car?*”, “*Did you get her the number 2 pencils for school?*” or “*I thought we were going to limit sugar after 5:00*”). If it does, that's okay. Almost all self-made Custody Plans work out this way.

So, with the personality type of your Co-Parent in mind and knowing that much of your conversation is going to be very stale and direct, you are going to need to find what medium works for them.

As much as I would love to have a “living document” that is accessible to all our mobile devices and lives magically in the Cloud somewhere that we could frequently reference, there is no way that would work for my Co-Parent.

Or at least I *thought* that was the case.

I was able to enroll her, through the language I mentioned in the first section, to give it a shot. She did... and it worked out for us.

After we put out Custody Agreement together, it's been revised just about every year usually around the time our Daughter school starts.

The first step, before you put any “pen to paper” or “finger to keyboard” is to talk.

Just talk.

The reason I can confidently declare this is because now that you've been through the Emotional section of this book, you have been exposed to tools that you can use to make talking something that flows and is easy to do.

Talk about what you want for your child and see if your Co-Parent is open to start the conversation about your Custody Agreement. Keep the conversation laser focused on your child and rarely mention your needs.

Your needs will come later and I promise I won't forget about that.

As you talk, look at your Co-Parent's body language. Does it feel like they are going to be receptive to starting the Custody conversation? Or do they look closed-off or annoyed?

Just note this and, if the time is right, proceed with bringing up the plan. If not, hold off and I'll give you specifics about how to setup the Custody Agreement meeting.

I'm going to first give you an overview of what we're going to create. I've been through this list before, but repetition is going to get your mental gears going. You can certainly mix or match any of these freely. And determine what is going to fit the needs of what works for you and your Co-Parent.

And, more importantly, if there is something unique to your situation please add it to these categories.

Here's a quick primer for you to be thinking about (with a little more detail than what I listed in the introduction):

**Parenting Time Table** - This is the general division of time and what we typically think of when it comes to dividing up time with your child. It could be right in half (like 50/50) or maybe 60/40, 70/30, etc. This is the percentage of time where you are solely responsible for your child.

**Medical and Health Care** - This is the person who is responsible for the insurance for your child. Typically this isn't split up, but considering how much insurance is needed these days one way to split this up could be Medical, Dental and Vision. I really break it down in this section.

**Legal Responsibility** - This is who is in charge of your child from the perspective of the State and Government. This agreement can be divided up each year and could even include Tax Dependents. So, for example, our public school has the ability to have at least 2 parents on any given list (Emergency contact list, calling in sick, etc) and I've always included both myself and my Co-Parent.

**Education & Extracurricular Activities** - This is essentially choosing which school your child will attend. Some people have a lot of energy around this and some parents don't.

This allows for Co-Parents to choose which sports or art programs each child will be able to participate in. Factors for this could include logistical things, like times when practices are or the amount of money available for joining in on these activities.

**Child Care** - If your child needs care in order for one Co-Parent to work, these are going to be the conditions that are defined for Child Care.

**Exchanges** - Here you come to a choice about the best way for exchanges of your child. Typically this can be done either picking up a child from school or from a Co-Parent's house. Decide in advance where the exchange is going to happen so that there are no surprises or tears from a child's waiting or expectations.

**Parental Guidelines** - These are the "rules". Things like diet, bedtime, tobacco and alcohol usage around children and whom is able to live in the same house as the child. This one may feel a little "touchy" but (like all of these items) I'm going to provide you with a series of questions to ask each other when it comes to this category.

**Traveling and Re-Locating** - Here we figure out what it looks like for traveling and the possibility of relocating in the future.

Obviously it's impossible to predict the challenges that haven't come up yet, but you can do your best to try to cover as much as you can out of the gate.

My intention is to get you started with the best foundation of an agreement as possible.

Of course the first step is that you are going to put this into practice in the real world and then, if necessary, make adjustments that everyone agrees with.

Yes, you want to be fair and you want to honor your agreement. However one thing that is going to be important is *flexibility*. As a parent, you know that changes come up and they need to be dealt with.

When you are ready to set this up, you are going to want to make things as SIMPLE and CLEAR as possible.

Take a deep breathe and repeat after me: *Simple and Clear...*

Don't you just love it how a nice big breathe can really mentally reset you? I know I do.

The less confusion we create the better off everyone is going to be and the more likely you are to have success with your new Custody Plan.

Now that you are in a calmer place (after that long breathe), I'd like you to read a couple pages that I wrote about "love and respect".

I chose to put these in this section because we're about ready to take on the hard stuff.

Hopefully you've had time to work on re-creating your previous partner, playing with your new skill of empathy and practice being flexible because these next few pages are really like a nice warm blanket over the skills that you are developing.

Think of this next small selection about love and respect as being the pep talk before the big game.

Inside your mind, you know what you really want. You've incubated your thoughts from the mind-virus of judgement and you have on the armour of affinity.

Now, it's time to create rapport with your previous partner. So, let's take this to the next level.

You are going to create a Custody Plan with them that literally takes a stand for your child. You are going make a workable plan that is flexible and beneficial, but also one that has both love and respect at it's core.

## Love and Respect

In general, men are looking for respect and women are looking for love.

It's the way that we're hard-wired and perhaps how we come out-of-the-box.

And let's face it, *we all* want these things and *we all* want them in varying combinations.

I know that this is a pretty big generalization, but without these two perceptually similar *but yet very different* things we would be unemotional robots just going through the motions.

And no one wants a simple "yes man" or someone who is perceived as uncaring or apathetic.

No one wants that automated person as a Parent (from your Child's perspective), no one wants this from a Spousal view and certainly no one wants this from a Co-Parenting context.

Before you start to really dig into your custody plan, I want you to consider these differences. The differences between the masculine desire for respect and a feminine need desiring love.

And please consider *what* is important to you and *why* it's important to you.

The reason I want you to consider these differences is to approach your situation with both equal parts love (*as in love for the person you created your child with and love for your child - obviously different than romantic love*) and respect (*respect for your Co-Parent, as a person, and respect for your child's strength*).

If you really aren't on good terms with your Co-Parent, take the idea of your love and respect as a sort of currency for your child's well-being. As much as we are going to ask for what we want, ultimately it's what works for your child that is going to be the determining factor for a given Agreement choice.

This doesn't mean that you are going to be "soft" and this certainly doesn't mean that you need to compromise anything you are asking for when it comes to your Custody Agreement.

What this does allow you to do is to level the playing field and really create something that has the long-term future in mind.

To show love to your Co-Parent you might want to consider the following three bullet points that can really expand your "mature boundary":

**Recall the qualities that attracted you to them in the first place.** Try to keep their best qualities at the forefront of your mind and remember that you're in this together. At some point you were attracted to their intelligence and charisma. You certainly don't need dwell on the past, but rather remember that at one point, this person meant the world to you.

**Think about ways that you can make their life easier.** Just because you're no longer together in the context of being a couple doesn't mean that kindness and understanding

won't go a long way to making everyone's life easier. Do what you can for the other person and it will come back to you — if in no other way than peace of mind.

Think of this in “acts of service”:

*Are there days that you could offer to pick your child up from School where your Co-Parent can't make it?*

*Is there a bill that you could pay for your Co-Parent to help them out financially this month?*

And think of this as “emotional support”:

*Are there any extra days you could give your Co-Parent so that they can have some needed alone time?*

*Is there a “hard conversation” you can have with your Daughter's Basketball coach that her Co-Parent usually takes her to?*

**Do the “Inner Work” that needs to happen to be the best Co-Parent you can be.** Really become the person you are looking for. Spend time alone, if necessary, to work on yourself. This allows you to be a solid rock for supporting others in this new phase of life that involves creating your own Custody Agreement.

With these three things in mind, you can really set the intention of a supportive and compassionate Co-Parenting life. That intention means that both Co-Parents, regardless of their past experience with each other, are going to come from a place of both love and respect.

This is going to create a space of calm, where it's okay to reflect and it's encouraged to be self-expressed.

Okay, now that we have intention let's start the process of creating your Custody Plan.



## **Make The Date and Honor It**

When you are ready to sit down with your Co-Parent make sure that you aren't going to be interrupted and that you are in a place where you can speak freely and openly.

Now that you have the "listening" for each other being self-expressed, let's make sure that the environment is acceptable for this.

Sometimes this could be one of the Co-Parents house, if you are in that place in your relationship, or a coffee shop or restaurant.

I highly recommend getting a kid-sitter and using a quiet coffee shop to create your Custody Agreement.

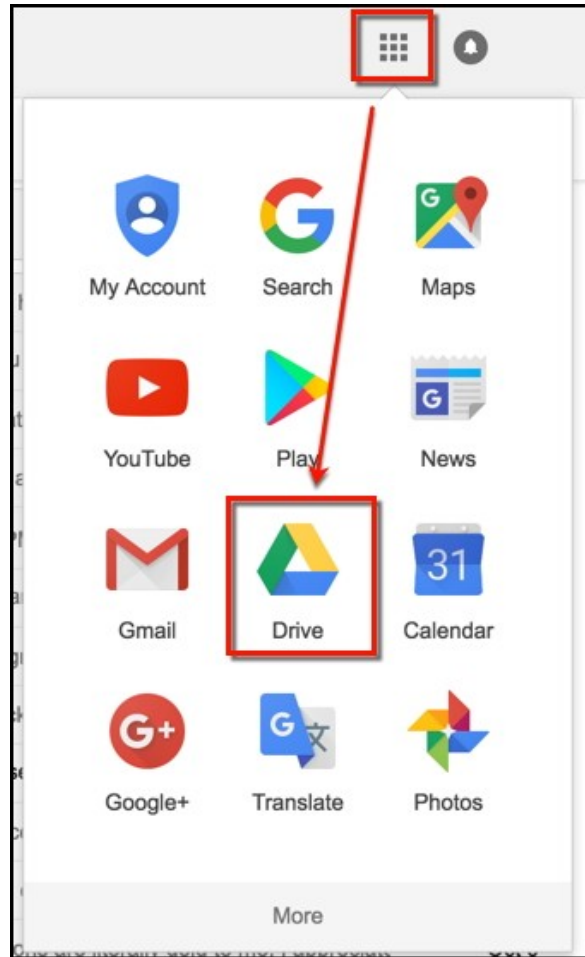
I recommend this for three important reasons:

1. It's a public place and if things get too heated, there is a less of a chance of someone flying off the handle or making a scene.
2. Just getting coffee is low-key and certainly has low expectations from the wait staff. So, for less than \$5 it's totally acceptable to get a cup of coffee and sit talking for three hours.
3. Coffee houses are typically used to college students spreading out papers and writing/talking, so you bringing in a laptop and a notebook isn't going to be too out of place - whereas this might look strange at a restaurant. Also, just about every coffee house has wi-fi so that you can jump on with your laptop to be able to get this agreement going.

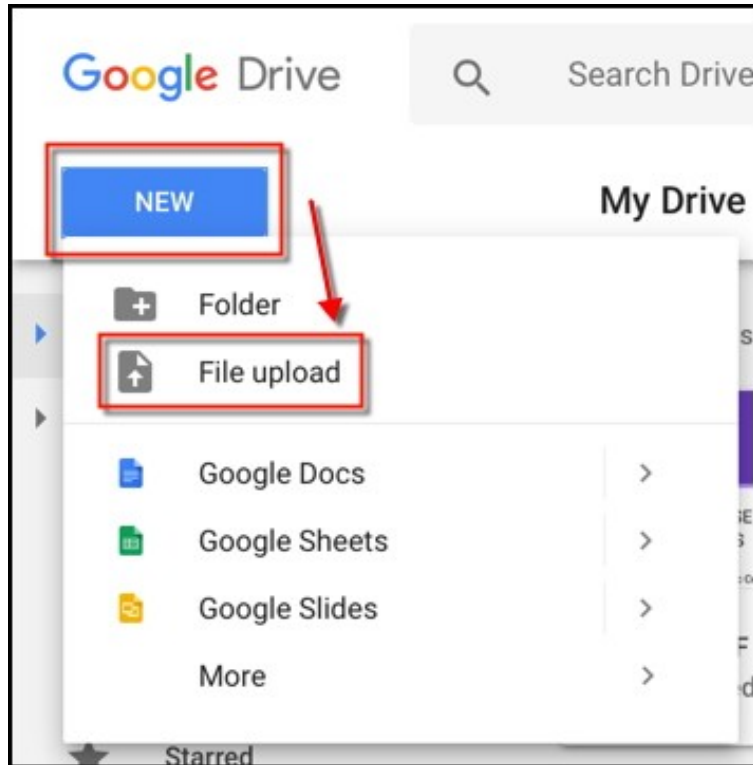
So, go ahead and establish a meeting time and place. Then, with laptop in hand and Google doc open, review each category and ask the questions to each other underneath each section.

If you want to jot down ideas now, go ahead and install the "Custody Without Courts - Shared Custody Plan" into your own Google Docs. You should have downloaded this at the same time you downloaded the book. If you are missing this document, please write me and I will send you a copy.

The first step is go login to your Gmail account. Look in the upper right-hand corner and you will see nine dots. Click on those nine dots and select "Drive":

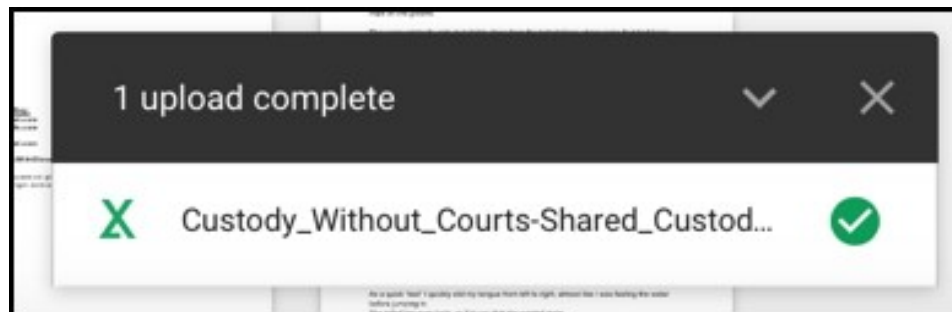


Click on “New” and select “File Upload”:

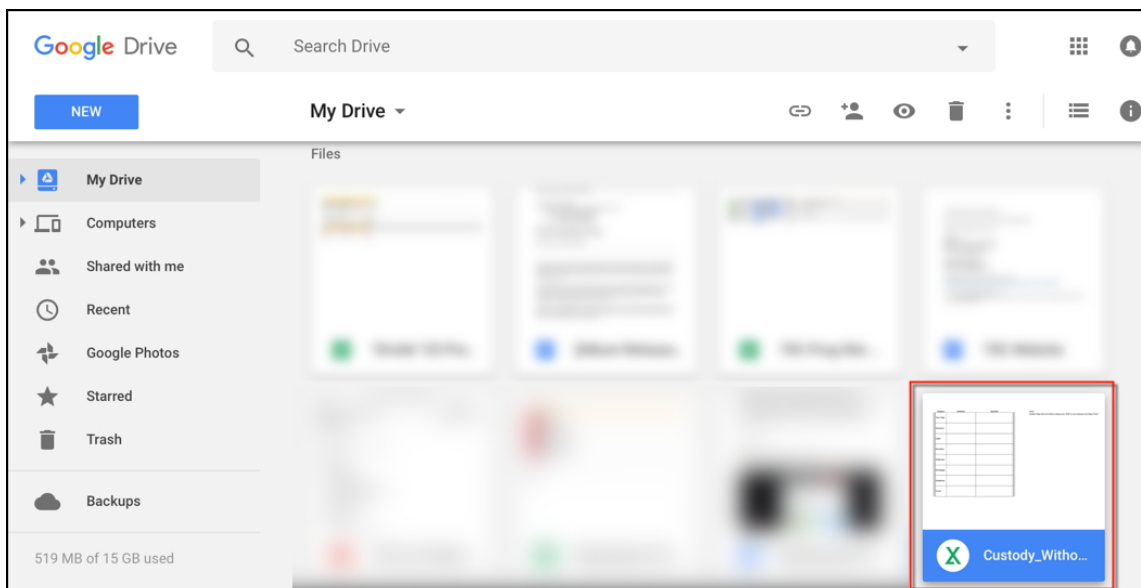


Navigate to where you downloaded the the “Custody\_Without\_Courts-Shared\_Custody\_Plan.xlsx” file and choose that.

In the lower right-hand corner, you’ll see that it’s been successfully uploaded when you see this window:



Once you see this message, look in your Google Drive and you should now see it. It may look something like this:



Go ahead and open it up by double-clicking on it. This will make sure that you have access to it.

You can also change the name to something that you both agree on, like “John and Megan’s Custody Agreement” or “The Smith’s Custody Agreement for Lily”. If you do change it, remember what you renamed it.

As I described before, there are 8 categories that you are going to define. I briefly mentioned them twice before, but I’m going to define them further in this section. I also include questions that are going to help you consider the best possible solution that is going to work for you.

That said, if you already have this worked out as part of a previous agreement, or even just from an understanding, feel free to bypass my questions. I’ve included those questions because they helped me in my Custody Agreement quite a bit.

The category is in bold and you should correlate that with Column B in the shared document.

Column C is the definitions. These are the definitions as they apply to your Co-Parenting Family.

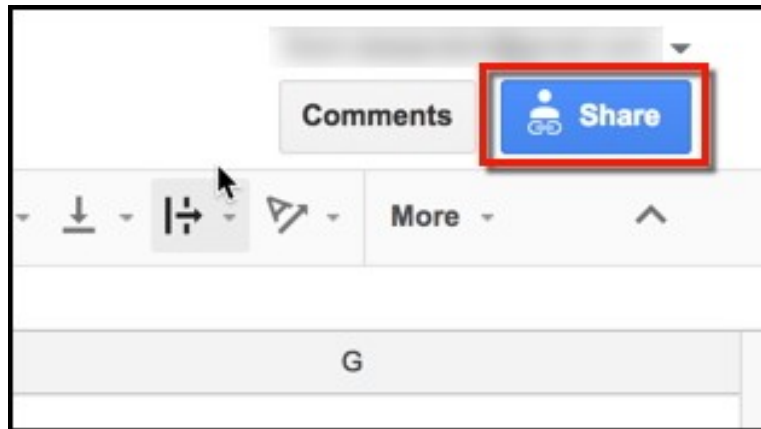
Column D are the specifics. These are going to be the actual, real-world specifics that you are going to use to define your Custody Agreement.

In fact, I’ve shared my own Custody Agreement in this section as well. If you want to peek ahead at what one looks like, scroll down (or swipe over) until you see the table with Blue and Green boxes.

Once you’ve completed your Child Custody Agreement, you will want to make sure that both Co-Parents have “edit” permissions on the document. This is important in order to make adjustments that we’re going to talk about in the fourth section of this book.

To assign Edit permissions, go to the Document that you've saved in Google Drive. The document I uploaded was called "Custody Without Courts: Shared Custody Plan", but you might have customized the file name, like I suggested.

With this Google Doc open, hit the "Share" button in the upper right-hand corner of the page:



This will bring up another window.

In the section where you see "People", type in your Co-Parent's Gmail address.

Click the pencil icon over to the right and a series of Permissions will appear. Select "Can edit" and then hit the "Send" button.

This will send your Co-Parent an email with a link directly to the Custody Agreement that you have set up.

---

**IMPORTANT:** Please make sure that this is the completed Custody Agreement. If you send a copy of this blank document to them and ask them to fill it out, you really haven't done the setup together.

And, more importantly, if they don't understand the context of this document there is a chance that it could be grossly misunderstood. Make sure that your Co-Parent knows this shared document is on the way before you share it with them.

---

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### People

 CoParent@Gmail.com × Add more people...

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Can edit

Can comment

Can view

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Send

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## Category 1: Parenting Time Table

The "Parenting Time Table" is the first category. This is the general division of time and what we typically think of when it comes to dividing up custody your child. Like I mentioned before, it could be right in half (like 50/50) or maybe 60/40, 70/30, etc.

Let the questions below guide you in determining how much time you can commit to when it comes to having custody of your child. Often what we think that we can handle and what the demands of other things are is different. In other words, you might want to consider what you take on in life and if there is going to be support for you at home.

This is also the one category that all the parents focus on and it seems to be the way people often *define* their custody agreement. But that's not going to be you and your Co-Parent because you are creating a listening and a space that is going to be safe and productive.

At first, this might seem like it's going to be the most uncomfortable conversation you have. However, remember that this is just one of 8 categories that you are going to discuss.

You might think "*let's get the heavy lifting out of the way*" or maybe in your Co-Parenting situation this is going to be the one you discuss the least. But I encourage you to not let this cloud your agreement. Something else that is just as important to you might come up in the other categories, like Education or Legal Responsibility where you might be able to come up with more time with your kids.

Regardless of how much Child time your Co-Parent is asking for, remember your empathy and flexibility skills because their request has nothing to do with you (as a person). It's imperative that you don't take this personally and listen to what they have to say.

In Section 3 we're going to get into Shared Calendars and how to use them, but for now just try to come up with an amount of time that you can split.

If you can't seem to agree on anything, the default should be 50/50 for the sake of fairness and ease of implementation. This is as equally as easy and equally as difficult for both Co-Parents.

Unless you are both set on a definite amount and have had no conflict getting this time table division to a fair and reasonable conclusion, use the questions below to foster conversation for this category.

### Questions To Help You Determine The Parenting Time Table:

*What are your Work Schedules?*

Are the relatively *static* (like a Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM)?

Or are they *dynamic* (meaning they change from week to week and/or month to month)?

*What are your Work "Constraints"?*

Do you frequently need to work late from an office or can you work from home?

If you can work from home, do you need an isolated area or can you work with kids present?

*Are there any other considerations?*

Do your Spouse's children come over during certain days of the week? If so, does it make sense for all the children to be together? Or is there a reason for them not to be around each other at the same time?

Does being close to the child's school matter when it comes to the Parenting Time Table? If one parent is across town and it takes an extra half-hour to get to school that might be an example of a consideration for extra time on weekdays, especially in the morning time when there feels like a rush to get to school.

Questions wrap-up: Remember that this isn't a contest or an attempt to be perceived as a "better parent". This is a practical and logical division of time that you use to be with your Children. Your children will love you even if your agreement gives you 20% of a week for kid time.



## **Category 2: Medical and Health Care**

Health Insurance can be confusing and potentially expensive. For that very reason it's important that this is handled in a clear and concise manner.

In fact, it might make sense to have one Parent be responsible for the Medical and Health Care of your child.

Sure you can break it up, but I've found that in my experience that becomes cumbersome and really just another thing to keep track of. In honor of keeping things simple, it might be easier to have a single person handle the Insurance.

If cost is a factor, look at all the plans available to you, especially if both Co-Parents have insurance offered through work.

If you do decide to break this up, and cost continues to be a factor, try to keep it at the "type" level, for example, Mom takes Dental and Dad takes Vision and Medical.

I also want to include the making and attendance of appointments in this category as well. What I mean is that the person who handles the insurance handles the appointments as well. As you'll see in my example plan, I handle the medical insurance for our child. This means that I was the one to make appointments for my daughter to see the doctor. Aligning with the first category, I make these appointments during the times that she is at my house so everyone can rest assured that she'll make those sessions. During that time she is my responsibility, so if I miss an appointment, that's my fault.

Often times doctors and dentists charge fees for missed appointments that can reflect and charge insurance companies. It's important that this one also is very clear and concise as to who is going to take care of the insurance and who is going to take care of these appointments.

### Questions To Help You Determine Medical and Health Care for your Child

*Does your job offer any type of insurance that you can use for your child?*

If so, what type of insurance does that job offer? Medical, Dental, Vision or all three?

If there is any sort of insurance that is offered through your job? And if so, is it "pre-taxed"? Is that a benefit worth considering?

*If both Co-Parents have Insurance through work, does one cover more than the other?*

How does it compare to the other work insurance plans?

If cost isn't a factor, what about the network of doctors in your city? Is one hospital or dentist physically closer than the other, given the choice? Does the child already have a favorite doctor or dentist that they like?

*If both Co-Parents are contributing, is there a fair and easy way to break up the cost?*

Would it be easy to have a shared bank account that both Co-Parents can login to and pay every other month? Or could this be done using PayPal or another online money exchange system for shared payments?

Questions wrap-up: Having good health Insurance, Dental and Vision insurance is important, especially for your kid. Please try to create this part of the agreement with a solution that makes sense for the child. Often times it doesn't serve our children to skimp on the level of insurance just to pay less in premium cost.

### **Category 3: Legal Responsibility**

This is the big, scary one that everyone likes to focus on because it sounds very daunting and almost “final”.

But the truth of the matter is that unless you’ve explicitly given up rights, in almost all States you have a right to Legal Responsibility of your child.

And whom better to figure that out than you and your Co-Parent, leaving the State and expensive attorneys aside?

Before we get any further, let’s define this in a way that is clear and makes sense.

So, when it comes to legal responsibility these are things such as:

- The official mailing address of the child
- Whom the school calls when there is an emergency
- Who can claim the child as a dependent on their taxes
- The Guardianship/responsibility of any Wills or Legal Trusts that the child might be on

Some of these things are pretty easy to go back and forth on each year if there is a clear agreement.

So, for example, in my Co-Parenting situation, my Co-Parent and I swap years for the tax dependent status that I mentioned above and we used my Co-Parent’s emergency contact information for our Daughter’s school because she lives close to school.

Sometimes it’s as simple and straight-forward as that.

On the other hand, Legal Responsibility can be difficult to conclude if both parents are interested in handling this aspect. It can be difficult because important places like Doctors, Dentists and School really only want one point of contact. That said, either Co-Parent that gets the category of Legal Responsibility must stick to their integrity in letting the OTHER Co-Parent know everything.

The other Co-Parent, by the same token, needs to know that the person who holds Legal Responsibility of their child is only the messenger.

This is another great opportunity to really dive into the level of transparency I’m talking about and what it means.

Case in point, I was held Legal Responsibility for my daughter when she was in 7th Grade. I started receiving automated calls from the school saying that she was marked absent for a couple periods during the day.

When I confronted her about it, she said that she was present and that maybe the teacher marked her absent by accident. The first time, I let it go, thinking that it was an anomaly. The very next week the same thing happened again and when I talked to my daughter about it she gave me a very similar answer to what she said before.

I told her Mom (my Co-Parent) and even when I did I felt like I was “tattling” on her. I told her because I made a promise that I was going to hold Legal Responsibility. And by

holding this category as something I am answerable for, I felt it essential to be as honest and transparent with her as possible.

In turn, this did two things: First, I was able to “make good” on my duties as a responsible Co-Parent. I had to get over feeling like I was betraying my child when, in fact, I really had her welfare in mind.

Secondly, it allows for my Co-Parent to talk to my daughter and maybe, in a “mom type way” get some answers that were more accurate than when I asked.

Remember, like I said before, unless you explicitly surrendered any rights, you are legally bound to your child as their biological Parent. It’s up to you and your Co-Parent to be as clear and specific in this category as possible.

### Questions To Help You Determine Legal Responsibility

*Is Legal Responsibility something we want to share?*

It might be extra work in the beginning, but if you are truly attempting to make every category equal, you might have to break this one up.

Examples of ways to break this up could be the Co-Parent that does Doctor’s appointments also takes school information or the Co-Parent that carries the Dental Insurance uses their address for the child.

*If one person is going to handle Legal Responsibility, how are they going to communicate to the other Co-Parent?*

Be really clear about what works best for you: Text, Email, Phone Call, In-Person during Drop-off, Twitter, Slack or Facebook Messenger? Everyone is different and changes from time-to-time, so it’s important to be flexible on this one and keep each other updated. We also have many choices about how we communicate with each other. Pick the one that is right for your Co-Parent.

Questions wrap-up: Legal responsibility is just that: A responsibility. It’s a responsibility to your child to get them the best care possible and a responsibility to your Co-Parent to let them know what is going on. If you need to take some time to synthesize your thoughts, take a break and come back to this one.

## Category 4: Education & Extracurricular Activities

This is the choice of where to send your child to school & education decisions. This could be based on a handful of limitations (or opportunities) such as geographic location to public school(s) and available money if you are choosing to send your child to Private School.

I've included Extracurricular activities as well because I've found that whatever sports my kids are playing, their Co-Parent is involved in virtually all aspects (team practice, private practice and games).

If your children play a lot of sports or participates in different art/music classes, whatever the extracurricular activity might be, it may make sense to break this out into two distinct categories for your Custody Agreement. For the sake of this first set-up, let's keep these two together.

### Questions To Help You Determine Education & Extracurricular Activities

*Are both Co-Parents in agreement with where their child is going to attend school?*

*Yes - Yes. We both agree where our child is going to get their education.* Perfect, go ahead and proceed with this as a category. If you have to break-out Extracurricular activities, this might be the time to do it.

*No - No. We disagree about where our child is going to get education.*

*What are the concerns?*

Educational Reputation: Are you concerned about the educational reputation of the school? Could it be a philosophy of teaching, such as Montessori or Waldorf that is an issue? Could it be the fact that it's private or religious that is causing a conflict? Is it a Charter School or regular Public Education?

Location: Are you maybe anxious about the times it takes to drop your child off at school or pick them up? Are you maybe stressed that it's a "bad neighborhood" or that the reputation of the school is with the students and faculty opposed to a philosophy?

Cost: Do you want to send your child to a Private school that costs money? Is this something you are willing to add as an expense for the education of your child? Do you have any Grandparents that could help you offset the cost of education?

Other Concerns: Do you have other concerns like bullying, siblings, meals or school philosophy and history?

If you ended up answering "No" to the one and only question, this could be a really great opportunity to practice radical honesty and tell your Co-Parent about how you really feel. Since you are now sharing the responsibility for Education, it's important to hold to your agreement.

## Category 5: Child Care

If both Co-Parents work and your child (or children) aren't able to stay home by themselves, you might have to come to an agreement about child care.

For the sake of this category, we're going to define childcare as a requirement for an adult to be present with your child.

This could be something like after-school care at the child's school or hiring a local High Schooler to babysit the child while a parent is unavailable due to work or previous engagements.

If you have children who are younger than school-age, this might be a bit of a "gotcha". This is especially true if you're used to having someone at home taking care of the child while you work. So, this category is going to be based on the age and maturity level of your child.

It's been my experience that I can leave my daughter at home at age 12. I should also mention that she is pretty mature for her age and very responsible, so leaving a 12 year old at home works for us. My 7 year old son? Nope. He's not ready. At least not at the time of this writing.

That said, you might need to correlate this with the Parenting Time Table that you listed in the first category. The reason why I'm creating this as it's own unique category is really for two reasons. First, it might not apply to everyone, but when it does apply it's very important. This may not be true for Co-Parents with older kids. Secondly, it allows you (as a Co-Parent) to know where your child is at all times - even when you are responsible for them but not able to be present.

For this category, get as specific as possible. It might look something like this: Monday through Friday, our daughter goes to after school care which is located at her Elementary school in the gymnasium. Dad will pick her up on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the school week.

### Questions To Help You Determine Child Care Needs:

*Does your Child need Childcare?*

*No, our child is ready to stay home alone and it fits both our schedules.* Great, move on to the next category, which is Exchanges.

*Yes, our child needs childcare.*

Is this going to be on a regular basis or does the need for Child Care have an end date in the near future?

Are you willing to split up those costs? Or should each Co-Parent be responsible for the child care debt according to the times the child is in their care?

Do you have a relative or a trusted babysitter that both Co-parents know?

If not, does this child care person or child care business need to be approved by both Co-Parents?

Are you, as collective co-parents, comfortable with using a babysitting App or the recommendation of a friend?

## Category 6: Exchanges

If you are sharing custody of a child it's important to make sure that you know where your child is at any given time. This is why in Section 3 we're going to setup a no-cost shared calendar so that you always know who is responsible and (because you share scheduling) where your child is.

This very well could be the most important category because it's the one that doesn't have much flexibility.

For this category, Exchanges are going to be how the child (or children) for whom you are constructing this Custody Agreement are swapped between households. This is also going to include the actual time that the child is dropped-off/picked up and the arrangement of how they are exchanged.

Out of all of the categories we're reviewing, this is the most "logistical". Unlike the Parenting Time Table that gives you a certain percentage of time with your child, the Exchange category is the very specific and very logical "trading off" of your child.

### Questions To Help You Determine Your Custody Agreement Exchange Schedule:

Using the Parenting Time Table as a "foundation" or "template", *what are the times you're going to exchange your child?*

Is the exchange going to take place after-school (for example one parent drops off a child for class and one parent picks up the child at school or at some sort of after-school child care?)

After you've determined the times, *how are both parents going to exchange the child?*

Are you going to drive your child from your home to your Co-Parent's home? Are you going to meet at a designated spot for the exchange? What makes the most sense in your situation so that it's geographically fair to each Co-Parent?



## Category 7: Parental Guidelines

This is the most “controversial” of the categories because it relies on the integrity and being flexible about something that, on the surface, seems like it’s nobody’s business. However, because you share custody of a young, impressionable child I wanted to include this in your Custody Agreement.

This addresses something that might be sticky for some folks. Others not so much.

Here you want to tackle the things like Alcohol and Tobacco consumption around your kids. Who is going to be able to sleepover and who is going to live in the house when your children are there. This could be a romantic partner (like a new Boyfriend or Girlfriend) or a rented room (like a tenant, Airbnb renter or friend sleeping on the couch).

Let’s also consider a consistent “school night” bedtime and any dietary restrictions what might be important for your child.

The reason why I say this is “controversial” is because it’s a direct promise about the use of your personal space while your child is present. Plus, it relies on the integrity of the Co-Parents to communicate in a clear and concise way about what is going on at their homes.

You can imagine the frustration that can ensue when a child comes home from her Mom’s house and tells Dad that there were many of Mom’s friends over or she woke up to find strange or unknown people in Mommy’s bed. This has the potential to send a Co-Parent down the road of frustration.

The reason this is a full category is because it sets reasonable expectations for each Co-Parent. While some Co-Parents might find this frustrating and challenging, others will find this easy to adhere to. We all have a mature boundary and this is where it gets expressed to your Previous Partner.

### Questions To Help You Determine Your Parental Guidelines:

*Question 1: Do you regularly consume Alcohol, Tobacco or Marijuana in your home?*

*No. There are none of these in my home and I don’t use any of them on a regular basis.* Great, move on to the next set of guideline questions for this category.

*Yes. I routinely use at least one of these three in my home.*

Do you keep this away from your child or do you have things out in the open, like cigarettes and beer?

Are both Co-Parents comfortable with the use of alcohol, tobacco or marijuana in the home?

If not, is there a compromise that can be made while children are present? Does it make more sense to “hide” this from them or to confront it head-on by telling them what alcohol, tobacco or marijuana is?<sup>1</sup>

*Question 2: Do I regularly have other people sleeping over or living in my home?*

*No. It’s just me and my immediate family living at home.*

Okay, this category is complete. Move on to the third question.

*Yes. I frequently have people spend the night or rent a room in my home.*

Is your home large enough for your child to have his or her own room? If they don't have their own room, is there a safe place they can go to sleep and have their own privacy? What could be done to provide a child with their own space in that home?

*Question 3: What is the agreed upon "school night" bedtime? Is it going to be necessary to setup a predetermined bedtime for the weekend as well?*

*Question 4: Are there any dietary needs or restrictions for your child? Are you able to meet those requirements for your child when they are in your care?*

<sup>1</sup>This isn't a "parenting book" and this is something you should discuss this with your Co-Parent to understand their perspective. While it's important to recognize them and their choices, I personally feel that it's more important to be consistent with what you tell your children. In other words, try to have this be the same for both Co-Parent's home. If it's not, make sure that the child is aware that use of alcohol, tobacco or marijuana is a choice.

## Category 8: Traveling and Relocating

This final category is going to include Traveling (either for personal vacations, family vacations or work) and re-locating. For the sake of definition, let's conclude that traveling is anything longer than two days away from home. By taking this on as the definition, we cannot count weekends as "travel" for this category. For some families, this might make sense to extend the definition of travel to three days.

If re-locating is something that has been a topic of conversation, this is where you are going to finalize the ideas or details. Details might include things like what city/state is the final destination and when you plan on moving. More importantly, relocation may require a complete overhaul of your Custody Agreement, so this can be a very important category.

### Questions To Help You Determine Traveling and Relocating:

*How often do you take Family Vacations?*

*Are these vacations planned well in advance or are they more "spur of the moment"?*

*What conditions could you put in place to make sure that you communicate your vacation plans with your Co-Parent?*

The shared calendar that we're going to set-up in the third section is a great tool for making your vacation plans known as soon as they are made.

*Do you frequently travel for work?*

*Will this travel for work affect the Parenting Time Table you set up in the first Category? Will travel affect Exchanges as well?*

*If so, are there trusted Child Care folks that can watch your child while you're away at work?*

Traveling for work might be an opportunity for "extra child time" with your Co-Parent. Work together to make this happen if child care isn't available for the times you'll be gone.

This concludes the categories that we're going to take on that are included in your Custody Agreement.

••••

With these in mind, we're about ready to fill out our Custody Agreement. We're going to say the same thing twice so that it is able to be seen visually (in the shared document) and heard out loud.

As you talk, remember to keep things civil and really do your best to bring those recreation, empathy and flexibility skills we talked about in the first section.

Please keep in mind that the whole idea of creating a Custody plan outside of the legal court system is to create something that is easy to understand and (more importantly) easy to follow.

If you choose to write this out on a physical piece of paper you are going to want to have a minimum of two copies of your custody agreement printed. This way each Co-Parent gets their own, unaltered copy of the agreement.

I would highly recommend creating this Custody Agreement as an electronic document, which I described in detail in the section called “Make the Date and Honor it”.

As a reminder, you’ll need to install this into your own Google Drive. If you haven’t done it already you should do it now.

The reason why you’d want to create this electronically, specifically in Google drive, is important for the 5 following reasons:

1. It’s a *centralized repository* for your Custody Plan.
2. Google Drive, by default, has *revision history enabled*. This means you can historically track changes to Custody Plan and see who made those changes.
3. Each row and column is *expandable*, meaning that it’s elastic to how much information you are entering into the cell. If you wrote this out on a piece of paper you’d be limited to the amount of space on that page.
4. The Custody Plan is *sharable*, not just with you and your Co-Parent, but perhaps with a Spouse or a grandparent. There is lots of flexibility to lock down the document.
5. The Custody Plan is both *printable and readily available on any mobile device with internet connectivity*.

I also have included a printable table in the Appendix of this book if you want to set it up manually.

## **The Custody Agreement Options**

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned that we're going to say the same thing, but different ways. This is important to do in order to speak to the listening of each Co-Parent.

At this point, I'm going to leave it up to you how you want to document this, but what I'm going to describe are two different options. One I just called "The Custody Plan". Consider this the long-form Custody Agreement that we've been talking about. This one is required because it's detailed and (if done using the Google Document method I recommend) very sharable.

The second option is "The Custody Matrix" and this option is a mini, condensed version of your Child Custody Agreement. I consider this optional. This would be the one I described earlier as what you'd put up on your refrigerator.

Alternatively, you might want to do BOTH of them.

In fact, when I help other couples setup Custody Agreements, I make them do both.

The optimum way to do this would be to:

**Create the Custody Agreement in the shared Google Doc that you uploaded to your own Google Drive**

Give both Co-Parents Permission on the doc and include anyone else who needs access to it.

**Print out the completed Custody Agreement to a piece of paper twice**, one for each Co-Parent. This way you have a tangible copy that you can hold in your hand.

**Fill out and Print the Matrix** (also attached as an appendix to this book), and make sure that each Co-Parent has a copy as well.

## **The Custody Plan (Required)**

Go to the shared Google doc and save it to your existing Google account. If you need help with this, please write me directly and I will assist you getting setup.

Alternatively you can print out the page in the Appendix. This has the extra space on it to allow for notes and to really break it down. The reason I recommend the Google Document is because you can expand or contract the space for each category to fit your needs, otherwise with paper you are limited to the physical space. Since your situation is unique, some categories might require more space than others and some might not need any information in them. It's best to land on something that is easy to setup, and the Google Doc is going to be the simplest.

If you have a printer that can print on two sides, that would be helpful (most printers do that these days). This way you could print the Custody Plan on one page and the Custody Matrix on the back.

Ultimately, you're going to make two versions of the Custody Agreement. One that is the actual rules (I call the Custody Plan) and one that is a daily "reminder" (I call the Custody Matrix).

The "actual rules" one is going to be in the Google doc. The "reminder" is going to be the junior version of this. Think of one as the "rule book", preferably using the Google Document and the other as being the one you'd stick on your refrigerator.

Have one person be the "scribe", meaning that they are the person that does the typing or writing down.

Go through each item, listing in the first column the "what is so". What I mean by that is write down how things are now.

In the second column write down specifics about what this is going to look like when this Custody plan is in full swing.

I've put an example of this below to give you specific details.

I've gone ahead and used a highlighter to show, in blue, the definition of what my Co-Parent and I agreed on as being our completion of the category. In other words, this is what we chose together for the category listed on the left.

So, we chose to start our Custody agreement with a 50/50 split and want to make sure that both Dad and Mom get at least one Weekend day with our daughter. That was important to both of us.

We then had to look at what it would take to make this happen.

We ended up choosing that Dad gets Wednesday through Saturday (4 days) and Mom gets Sunday through Tuesday (3 days). Then, the next week, we reverse this with Mom getting Wednesday.

So, the second week would be Dad Thursday through Saturday (3 days) and Mom gets Sunday through Wednesday (4 days).

The reason for this particular switch, and the way we did it, was because at the time Mom worked on Saturday nights and didn't have the ability to have her daughter that day.

Continuing with this example, the next category is "Insurance".

As it turns out, both me and my Co-Parent have insurance offered through work. After reviewing the options we chose to go with the lowest priced insurance that offered the best amount of coverage, the entire time thinking about how this was going to benefit the daughter that we are both responsible for.

Another soft-benefit to choosing Insurance was the hospital that takes our Daughter's insurance, including doctors and specialty doctor's visit, was between our two homes. This made the choice pretty easy from a practical standpoint.

What we came up with was Dad taking on Medical insurance that is \$170 a month, but available as pre-taxed offered through work, so there is some cost savings there. Then Mom took Dental and Vision insurance that ended up being a total cost of \$95 a month.

While it's not evenly split down the middle as far as cost is concerned, we attempted to make it as fair as possible.

The rest of the examples I'll let you review in the graphic below.

Take a moment and review the example table.

Carefully read each section and ask yourself if you would do something similar with your Co-Parent or if you'd make something different.

This really is your opportunity to create. I really mean that.

There are no "right" answers for this one. There is only the "**right answer for right now**". A good example, and the reasons I purposely shared it, was Mom working on Saturday night.

That is a great example of her literally (e.g. physically) not being able to have our daughter over at her house.

This is where we need to practice flexibility and honor the fact that she's got a job that doesn't allow her to have Saturday evenings off. It's just an example, but a good one, of how flexibility is important in your role as Co-Parent.

## Custody Plan Example

Time Table	Dad 50% and Mom 50%, with each Parent getting at least one Weekend day	<i>Dad gets Wednesday through Saturday and Mom gets Sunday through Tuesday. This then swaps <u>every other</u> week with <b>Wednesday</b>.</i>
Insurance	Dad pays Medical insurance and Mom pays Dental and Vision insurance	<i>Medical is \$170 a month. Dental is \$80 and Vision is \$15 (\$95 total) Dad: \$170 a month Mom: \$95 a month</i>
Legal	Mom's address will be used on legal documents	<i>Mom's address is closest to the school and assures staying in the district. If Dad's address changes this can be changed in the future.</i>
Education	Daughter will go to the Public School she currently attends.	<i>This may change when Daughter enters Middle School. This will be revisited in 2 years.</i>
Child Care	On days that Dad picks up daughter at school, she will attend the after school program.	<i>Dad will set this up with School for the days that he needs it.</i>
Exchanges	All exchanges will be either at School (the end of school or child care) or at Mom/Dad's home.	<i>Dad picks up Daughter from school on Wed. &amp; drops off at Mom's by 9 AM Sunday. This will be reversed when it's Mom's turn to drop off Daughter at Father's house.</i>
Guidelines	There will be no alcohol or tobacco consumption in front of Daughter. No one sleeps over with Daughter present until acknowledgement to Co-Parent.	<i>This only applies while Daughter is at home. Otherwise all bottles will be removed from the house before she comes over.</i>
Travel	When creating trips, we will do our best to give 2 weeks notice.	<i>This will be done by updating the shared calendar. If re-location comes up, we will revise this document accordingly.</i>



## The Plan Matrix (Optional)

Now that we know the categories we're going to fill, create a matrix, like the one listed below. Along the top, list all 8 categories that we're going to talk about.

There is a Landscape version of this matrix in the appendix of this book that you can print out. I did not include a shareable electronic version of the Plan Matrix. If you'd like one, please write me directly and I will send you a copy.

Once it's printed out, you'll see something like this:

Time Table	Insurance	Legal	Education	Child Care	Exchanges	Guidelines	Travel

If you chose to fill out your agreement on paper, turn the page over and print out the Stage 2, which is the Plan Matrix.

Here, we are going to put in just the essentials of what our agreement is.

Think of this as the “quick reference guide”, even though we're not going to be referencing it that often.

There is something about writing things out twice that really stabilizes it into your brain. The first time is the “negotiation” (and hopefully it doesn't feel like a negotiation) and the second time you are just saying what you said before.

So, your Custody Plan Matrix might look something like this:

Time Table	Insurance	Legal	Education	Child Care	Exchanges	Guidelines	Travel
50/50 - See Schedule	Medical	Dad's Address: 321 Shaver	Irving Park Elementary	Pay for Wed	School & Home - See Schedule	No alcohol or tobacco usage	2 week notice of travel
50/50 - See Schedule	Dental and Vision				School & Home - See Schedule	No alcohol or tobacco usage	2 week notice of travel

It's important that you both have copies of this document, and I'm including access to the Google doc as “copies of this document”.

Now that this has been done, congratulate yourself. You've created the first draft of your Child Custody Agreement together.

You and your Co-Parent have saved a ton of money. You've also save quite a bit of time. You saved money because you didn't hire an expensive Family Attorney and you saved yourself time because you didn't need to schedule Court dates or Family Court hearings.

Plus, don't forget that you've done great work.

And you did it together.

You have worked on yourself by getting that emotional side handled. You've taken those skills and you've put them into action in the real world by creating both the Custody Plan and the Custody Matrix.

Now, it's time to take a deep breath.

Reflect on what you've done and get prepared to put this plan into action.

I've included some "extra-credit" reading for this section about Perspective-Shifting and specifically how it applies to Time. The reason I put this into this section is because this idea fit right into my own life at this step in my Co-Parent Evolution.

It's optional, but I highly recommend you read it.

Otherwise, skip to section 3 and take on Putting your Custody Agreement into action by setting up a Shared Calendar and sticking to the accountability and integrity you've setup with you Co-Parent.

## **Perspective-Shifting (Extra-Credit Reading)**

I'd like to take a pause while you are getting ready to really streamline your Custody Agreement and offer a couple new perspectives.

These two perspectives have to do with Time and Workability. There are two different points of view that I wish I'd had access to during the first setup of my Custody Agreement.

I often get lost in my own head, my own "story" if you will, of how things "should be". When, in reality, by being concerned about these sort of things I found myself not being present about what was really happening to me.

I chose Time specifically because it's the one thing that feels like it's in limited supply. When you think about time as a currency, it takes on a whole new perspective. Unlike money, that ebbs and flows in and out of your life, Time is finite for everyone. While we might not have the same challenges or successes, we all have the same 24 hours in each day.

I also chose to talk about Workability. The idea with this ending the section is to give you a perspective that is the combination of Empathy (being able to feel like your Co-Parent) and setting up the Custody Agreement itself. What I'm talking about in this specific perspective is making your agreement workable for everyone involved.

## **Time As A New Currency**

We dearly love our children, and our time with them is limited. It's the same for all of us. It's limited by their age, the time they aren't present because they are at school and sharing them with our CoParents.

Even if you are Parenting full time or you are a Single Parent, it's a fact that we do not have an infinite amount of time to raise responsible adults.

One way to view this is that time is a new currency.

This is especially true as both you and your kids get older. Money, Health and Wellness can subjectively be created with work and effort, but time is and always will be finite.

This means that you get what you get and you can't really create more of it.

Or can you?

I'm going to share with you a concept from a friend of mine who is way smarter than me. It's going to put you back into control over your time and give you ownership over it.

Whenever I get frustrated about this, like a deadline is due at work or I'm late for my daughter's Softball game, I remember when my Son was 5 years old and I'd tell him "you get what you get and you don't throw a fit".

A book that I was reading, unrelated to Parenting and more for myself, is called "The Time Paradox" and it talks in depth about our relationship with time, but more importantly it discusses how we have a bias with time, almost a cognitive bias.

What I mean by that is that some folks relate to time as the past, present or future to more of a degree than the others.

For the most part we believe, in general terms, that we are balanced between them.

Or at least we'd like to think that.

We know that nothing in the Past can be changed and that the future is uncertain for everyone and anyone.

With this Past bias in mind, we often can get wrapped up as events being a static thing when in reality time is elastic and evolving.

When I was younger I never thought that I would even have kids, let alone have one and even go through the Adoption system to become a father again.

The point of the book "The Time Paradox" was that in all scenarios (or options that we encounter in life) one can be stuck in a dream-like happy state or dismal, painful state in any of those and anything in between.

So, someone trapped in, say, a tragedy in the past can live their lives in misery because they are re-living that event over and over again in their heads - perhaps even to the point of being depressed about it.

That same event could be transposed as anxiety because they fear they are going to repeat that event in the future.

Either way you slice it, we all have different views of time and even different relationships to time.

And remember talking about being stuck in the crests of emotional cycles? I noticed our relationship with time can be directly related to the way we respond to those emotional cycles.

While it doesn't apply directly to the boots-on-the-ground scheduling that we're going to talk about in the next section, what came up for me was how my relationship to time is - and moreover to treat it like money or some other asset because it's really that: Time is a precious commodity.

Regardless of the relationship you already have or want to have with time, you need some solutions *right now* that are going to help you with your scheduling.

This is scheduling for activities that your children are going to be engaged in, potential play dates and even the division of time between you and your previous partner based on the Categories you filled out for your Child Custody Agreement.

Now that we live in 2017, just about everyone has a "smart phone" of some kind or another.

And we're all familiar with Google and the Google Suite of programs they call GSuite. This is the same cloud application you setup your Custody Agreement document in.

If you didn't know it already, your Gmail account that you use to check email also has a "baked in" calendar which you can easily share with other people. This means that just having Gmail means that you also have a sharable calendar that comes with your account (in addition to the Drive you have there you created your Custody Agreement).

So, when it comes to scheduling let's first take a look at a shared calendar. This service can, at a glance, show you when your next meeting with your child is and also, if kept clean, can provide a historical record for visits and length of visits.

The real "secret" to using the Google Calendar is to know what to share and how to share it. We're going to get into way deeper details in Section 3 about this. But before we do, be thinking about your relationship with time:

*Do you constantly think about what's coming next? Or are you centered and grounded in the moment? Are you concerned about future meetings or do you prefer to just kinda "go with the flow"?*

Be thinking about that as we begin to explore a little more.

One observation I've made is that many folks, in general, feel like they are a "time victim".

What I mean by this is that they are either in a hurry, feeling like they have no time to get things done or they are complaining about being bored.

There are times in my life where I've certainly identified with one of those feelings.

Rather than remain (or become) a victim to time, I was on the lookout for a happy medium to balance out between these seemingly radical polarities.

And I found it through a book that was literally right in front of my face.

In his book “The Big Leap”, my friend Gay Hendricks talks about an idea called “Einstein Time”.

The idea behind “Einstein Time”, as Gay defines it is “you are where time comes from, therefore you can make as much of it as you want.”

Creating my own time sounds like something I’d really be into.

He calls “Einstein Time” the opposite of “Newtonian Time”.

Gay defines the Newtonian paradigm as “one that assumes that there’s a scarcity of time, which leads to an uncomfortable feeling of time urgency inside of us. And we think that what is ‘out there’ is causing the feelings ‘in here’.”

What I realized when I read that description was that I’ve lived in “Newtonian Time” my entire life and I didn’t even know it.

Thankfully, Gay offers a remedy that I applied to my life and it’s made a huge difference.

He says it’s a “space” problem and not really a “time” problem.

Ah ha! This is where science comes in. And who thought that you’d be using science while creating your Child Custody Agreement?

When I really got this, it was a nice breakthrough for me. It made such a huge impact on my life that I wanted to make sure I shared it with you.

A quote about Einstein time in his book explains it perfectly:

“An hour with your beloved feels like a minute and a minute on a hot stove feels like an hour!”

Gay says that if you were forced to sit on a hot stove, you’d become preoccupied with trying not to occupy the space you’re in. He then goes on to say that if there is any part of our lives that we are not willing to accept, we will experience stress and friction in that area.

Yikes! Who wants to experience stress and friction? I mean, you are already a Parent, a Co-Parent and a ton of other things. And that’s just with your kids. I’m sure that you are many other things in places like work and school.

The first thing that came to my mind was the possible conflict that comes from being a Co-Parent.

This could be with your Previous Partner, your current spouse or even with your kids (depending on their age).

And what better time than now to change your relationship to time and your relationship to others?

This is especially true in creating your Custody Agreement. You are creating the very thing that is going to affect you for the rest of the time you are responsible for your children.

Getting back to Gay’s example: I know that if I were sitting on a hot stove and stayed there, I would wallow in the pain for a brief moment and feel really sorry for myself. I’d probably want to jump off as soon as I possibly could to avoid more pain.

But how do we transmute this feeling of scarcity and pain into actual ownership of time?

When you are BEING with your time, you are aware of it. With this awareness you can literally sense the energy associated with what you are doing.

If you sense that there is a feeling of urgency attached to that energy, that's a sure sign that you need to feel why that is there.

You might ask yourself: *What am I anxious for?*

Do you get these feelings around your Previous Partner?

I know I used to. If you do ask yourself: *What in this moment is making me feel anxious?* It's not just their presence, it's got to be something inside of you.

After you ask yourself that question, allow and accept what is so. Do this instead of fighting against it. When you are with "what is so" this allows energy to flow and it can give you a sense of calm that you are indeed in control.

In fact, you are in total control of how you view time and you always have been.

Because you are in total control of your view of time, you can check-in with yourself and ask yourself "Am I being loving here?" or "How does this *really* feel?"

This will create the context for you to allow and accept where you are and what you are doing rather than fight against it. By being with it, you are letting energy flow back to you, which is only going to make you feel better about whatever is happening in that moment. But more importantly, it puts you right back in control.

This makes you a Source for time and ownership of that time.

If you'd like to do a deep-dive into "Einstein" versus "Newtonian" time, you can do so in Gay's book "The Big Leap". This is just a taste for you as you are wrapping up your own Child Custody Agreement.

## **What Is Workable**

To make any effective Custody Plan, it's got to be "workable".

In previous sections we talked about the skills to say what you are going to say and to say it. We talked about how to take on someone "emotionally" and to really feel how they are going feel.

These are important skills and I have to say that I've made a conscious effort to be very direct in what worked for me, attempting to stay away from abstraction.

But the reality is that we're going to be dealing with humans. Humans are imperfect and even though we try our best to be as present as possible, there are times where we fall short.

If you've made it this far, there is no doubt that you've had to put those new skills to the test.

Keep in mind that in order for something to be workable, there are going to be roadblocks. You are going to stub your toe on some things... Money for picture day is going to be forgotten, a favorite stuffed animal is going to be left at a friends house and there might even be a missed pickup or two.

It's going to happen, but remember that your goal is to get a workable plan together.

By workable I mean both practicable and feasible at the same time.

As important as it is to ask for what you really want, you also need to consider how it's going to work in the real world. And I'm sure that you've been subtly thinking that the whole time.

To make your Custody Plan workable, make sure that you are clear as you can possibly be with your communication and accept that in the beginning there will be a little more over-communication than not.

And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

One thing that I made clear to my Co-Parent was that she could never over communicate enough with me about my kids.

And you know what?

It worked out really well that way.

Keep this in mind as you proceed to the next step, which is going to be to put your Custody Plan into action. This is where it all comes together and the theory, ideas, time-tables, rules and exchanges all happen in the real world.

I encourage you to remember that you've created the best plan for your child. You are creating the space for your child to thrive in the warmth and safety of two parents that love that child more than anything in the world.

Now, let's get this going and put our plan into action.



## Section 3: Putting Your Custody Agreement In Place

You've come a long way.

We've tackled the emotional side, preparing you for setting up your Custody Agreement. I call this doing the "heavy lifting" because most of the time the emotional side isn't really clear to us. This is especially true when we are in moments of stress. In other words, we have feelings and we aren't sure why they are coming up, nor do we know what to do with them.

The reality is that we've concluded that not knowing is okay.

What is important is that we dealt with these emotions and, just like the wave in the ocean, it comes and goes away. It will come again, maybe stronger than before, but you can bet half a paycheck that it will indeed go away as well. And when it does come, we let it wash over you because we know that it will go away.

You've also set up a Custody Plan.

You've done your best to work with your Co-Parent to be able to get a workable agreement that is going to benefit your child and at the same time honors both you and your Co-Parents as adults.

Congratulations! That, in and of itself, is the whole reason we embarked on this journey together.

Whew!

Take a moment to reflect on what you've done.

Most people couldn't get past the anger or frustration of a break-up or someone getting the "better half" of a deal.

You've come a long way since you started reading this book, a lot further than most of the Co-Parents that rely on the State to tell them what to do.

Now comes the part where we put it all into place.

And just like learning any new skill, there might be some bumps and bruises along the way.

But hang in there with me and you'll soon have a routine down that is going to feel easy and natural.

The first thing we're going to take-on is going to be Shared Calendaring.

This is a good place to start because timing is everything. (*Pun fully intended*)

And when we are on the same page logistically with our Co-Parent, we're in a good place to start the repetition of drop-offs, school pickups and knowing well in advance when Vacations are coming up.

## **Shared Calendaring**

One really great way to track your time is to use a Shared Calendar.

This is really the first step for putting your Child Custody Agreement into action.

For the purposes of this book, I've chosen Google Calendar because it's free, it's widely-used and it works on all sort of different mobile devices. There are a few bonus things in that Google Calendar allows you to setup alarms and get notifications. Plus, on top of all that, it saves your calendar items so that you have historical documentation.

I'd like to take this time to accomplish three things: 1. Some quick instructions on how to setup a Calendar, 2. how to share it and 3. how to create a calendar item.

If I go too fast or this doesn't make sense there is a ton of documentation online that will help you get setup, otherwise I've done my best to present the instructions for setting up Google Calendar as best I can. Also, feel free to write me directly if you have specific questions about setting up shared calendaring and the online documentation seems too overwhelming.

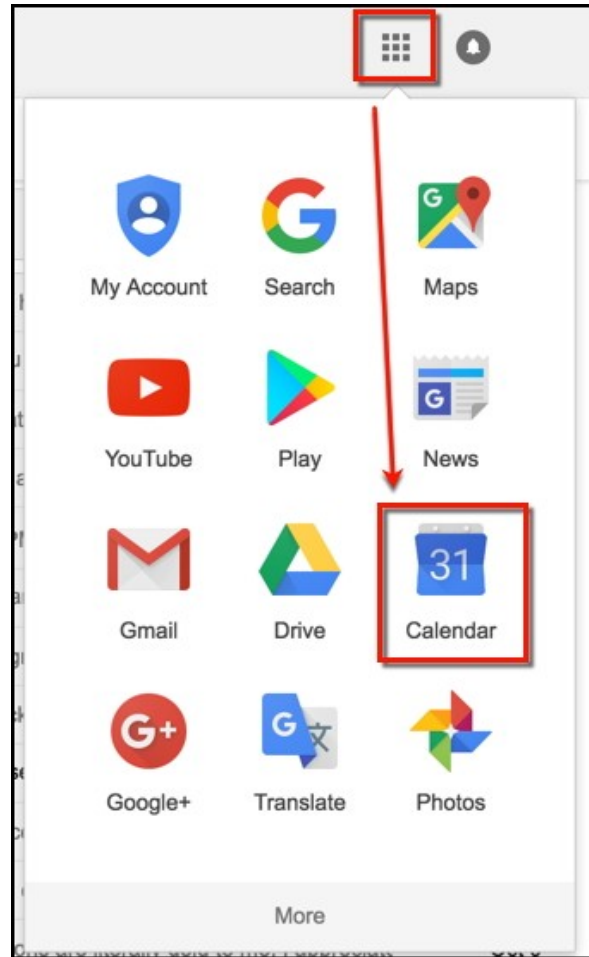
Ultimately, your goal is simple: You want to make sure that you have enough time with your Children and you want to honor the agreement you've made with your Co-Parent.

### **How To Set Up and Share Google Calendar**

So, let's break this down:

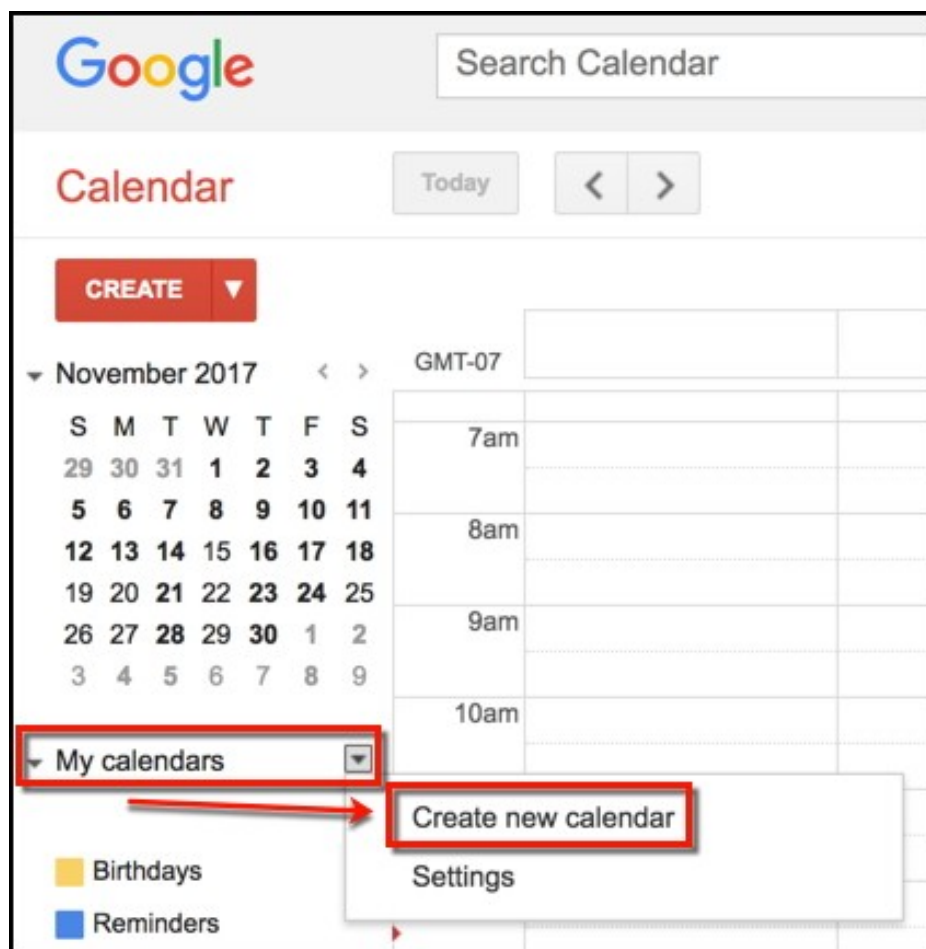
First, create your calendar. This is done by going to an icon the upper right-hand corner of Gmail and hitting the nine dots icon. It's also called "Gsuite". This will expand quite a few things that come with your free Google account.

Find and select "Calendar".



This will fill your screen with a “week view”, or the days of the week that you are on.

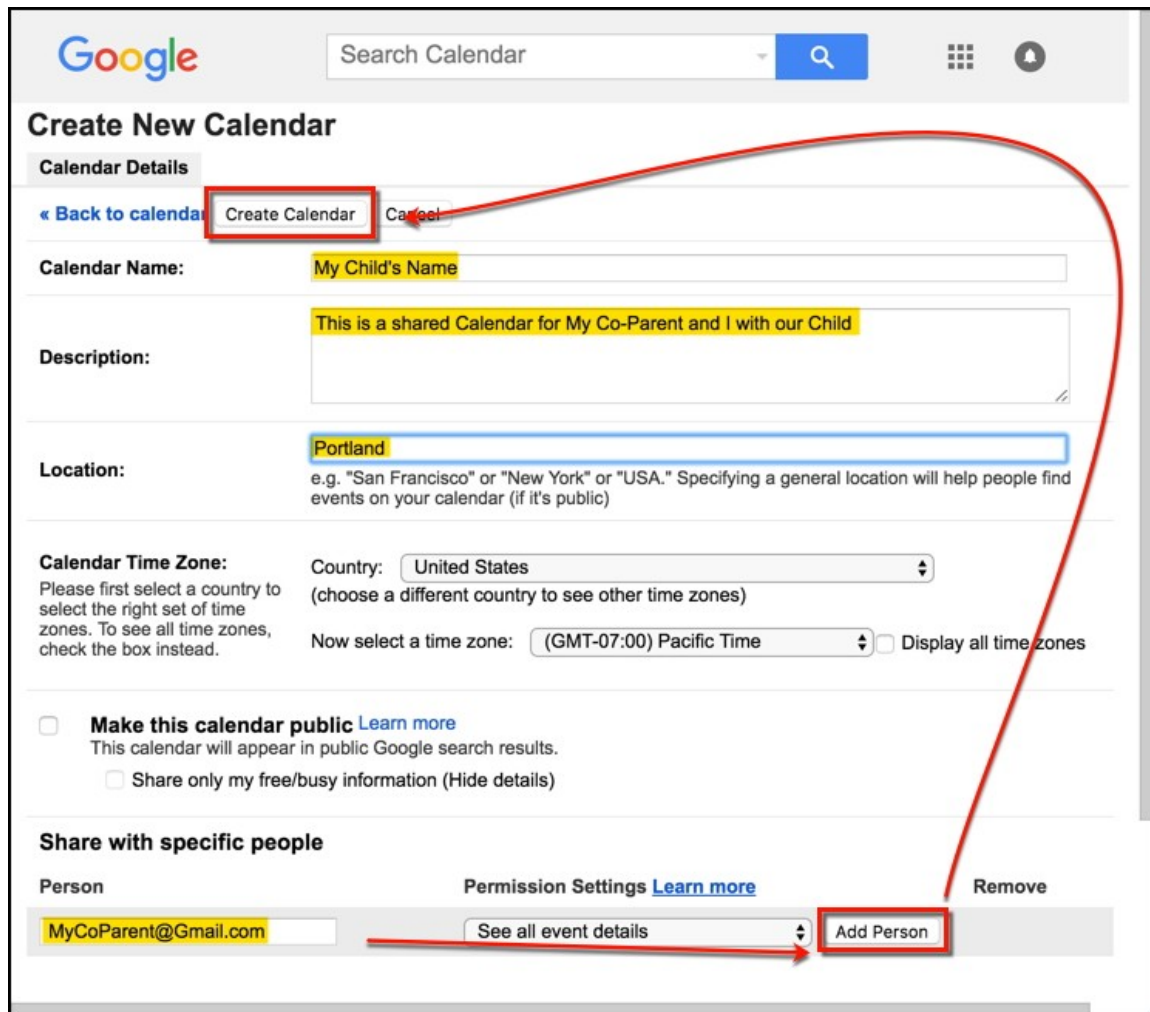
Look over to the left hand-side and you’ll see a section called “My Calendars”. Hit the down arrow and you’ll see a choice to “Create a New Calendar”.



This will open up another screen where you really only need to enter in two pieces of information:

The first piece of data is the name of the Calendar. Let's call this your child's name, for the sake of this example.

Secondly, you need to share this calendar with someone. You'll see a section called "Share with Specific People" about half-way down the page. Enter in your Co-Parent email address and then hit "Create Calendar" at either the top or the bottom of the screen.



That's it.

You've created a calendar and you've successfully shared it.

Now, it's important to mention that **your Co-Parent needs to acknowledge and accept** that they are going to use the calendar. This is done automatically through Google. Google will send out an invite that they need to accept. It's pretty easy to accept, and at the time of this writing they can accept the calendar by just clicking on a link inside of an email Google sends.

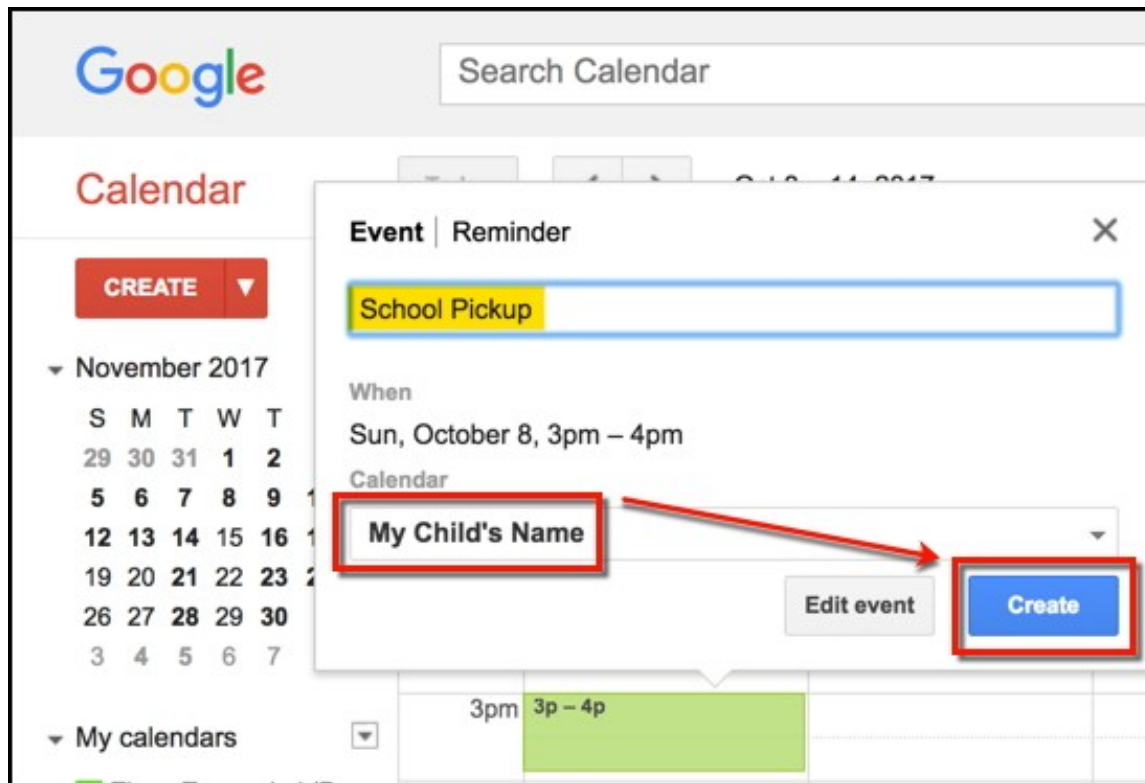
Once a calendar has been created, let's create our first item.

And, this is important, this is an item you want your Co-Parent to see.

Choose a day and time that something is happening. Let's say that it's your day to pickup your daughter from school. Go to the 3:00 PM time slot and click that area.

A pop-up window will appear with a blank box to write in. This is what the event is going to be called. Let's call our example "School Pickup, so type in "School Pickup" into the box.

Make sure that you are on the correct Calendar (from the drop-down menu at the bottom) and hit the “Create” button.

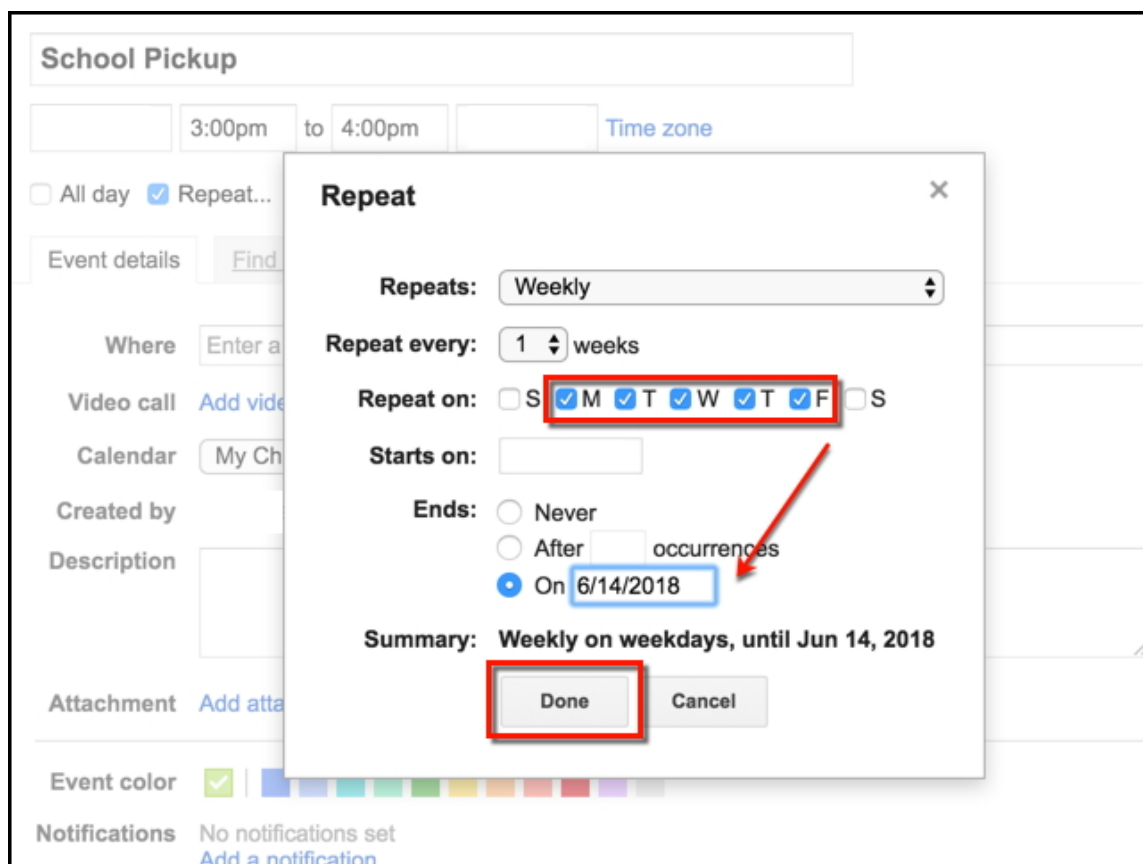


Now, you’ll see a block of time listed on the Calendar. It will be a different color than the rest of the calendar so it’s pretty easy to see.

If you need to make changes to this calendar item, just double-click on it. The event will open into a new window and Google will give you the ability to edit the event.

**Here’s a helpful hint:** Ask yourself “*Is this going to be a recurring item?*”, maybe something like a School Pickup is going to happen more than once during the week. If this is going to be an event that is going to happen often (meaning more than once a week), open the item to edit by double-clicking it and select the radio button called “Repeat...”. Fill out the drop-down menus with how often this event is going to recur.

It may look something like this:



## **Long Term Calendar Usage**

Now that we can create calendar items and share them with your Co-Parent, set aside an hour or so and enter in all the important events for the rest of the year.

I know this sounds a bit overwhelming at first, but really take the time to put up what you know is going to happen already.

The reason I suggest this is that it shows transparency on your part and is a way for you to display your Mature Boundary by being upfront with your requests for time with your child.

This might include things like camping trips you have pre-planned for the Summer or other trips you want to take, like attending a friend's wedding where you want to bring your child.

The way you do this is you bring up a calendar item (from the main Calendar window in Google), go to the "Edit Events" section.

In the middle of the calendar item page, just over to the left, is a drop-down menu that says "Calendar".

Here you will see your personal calendar along with the calendar that's the name of your child, the one you just created.

**IMPORTANT:** For each event that you want to explicitly share with your Co-Parent, you'll need to use that drop-down menu to select the calendar you want.

Then you can really take this to the next level.

You can even go through and setup your OWN calendars that overlay the one you've already shared with your Co-Parent in order to track your own events. Only this calendar, don't share it with them. You'll want to keep this one private.

To setup your own calendar, just follow the steps above but **do not** add their email at the bottom of the Setup Page window.

In doing so, this will ensure that you *aren't* sharing it with them.

So, for example, if you have a challenge with your Co-Parent dropping off your child at your house, you can make a note each time they are late. Do this the exact same way as creating your "School Pickup" event that we did as an example before, but making sure to add it to only your personal calendar. Now, you have your own documentation of when they were late or a pickup got mixed up.

Just make sure that when you are at the "Edit Event" section that the calendar labeled with your name and the word "Personal" in parenthesis is selected. If you don't, you'll be sharing everything.

I went through these instructions pretty fast, but once you start creating a few calendar items and events in Google Calendar, you'll start to see the benefit of shared calendars and how they can really assist you in keeping everything straight when putting your new Custody Agreement into action.



## **Your Personal Parenting Journal**

Another great usage for Google Drive is creating a Google “Doc” that is going to serve as a journal for putting your Custody Agreement into action.

Because you are using your own Google account (basically your Gmail account), you already have access to this and I’m going to show you exactly how to set this up.

It’s private and only viewable by your account (unless you explicitly share it with someone else).

The purpose of this journal is to only use it during the first month of your Custody Agreement.

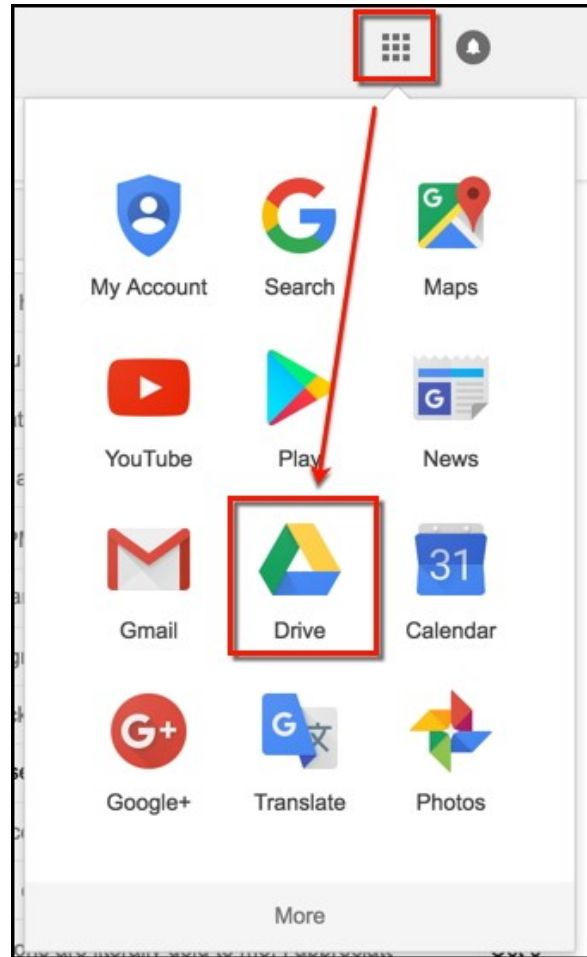
If you get into a good routine with it, feel free to use it for more time as you see fit. The reasons that I’m suggesting the limit of the first month is because it’s what we’re going to using in the fourth and final section of “Custody Without Courts” for adjusting our Custody Agreement.

During this action phase of your Custody Agreement, it’s going to be critical that you write down what works and what doesn’t work. It’s important to capture your emotions in that moment. Often times we can feel poorly about a situation and not remember why we felt negative about it. By documenting your emotions and what was going on at the time, you are more apt to get clarity around this.

It’s your Journal, so you are free to write down things like how you feel about something and what feelings came up for you when this Custody Agreement started.

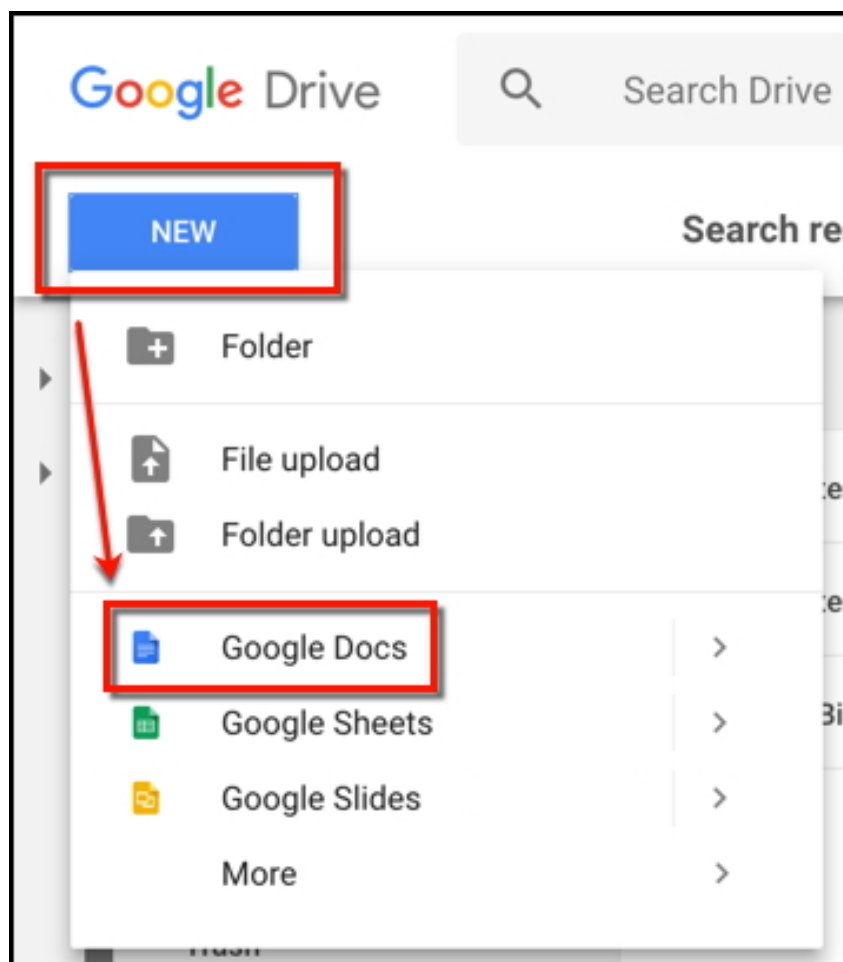
You can setup your journal by opening up Gmail and finding those 9 dots in the upper right-hand corner again. This is the same thing you did when setting up the Calendar.

This time, select “Drive” instead of “Calendar”:



This will open up your Google Drive. Just like your Calendar, this is free from Google and very handy when you want to safely document changes.

Hit the “New” button on the left-hand side of the page and select “Google Docs”:



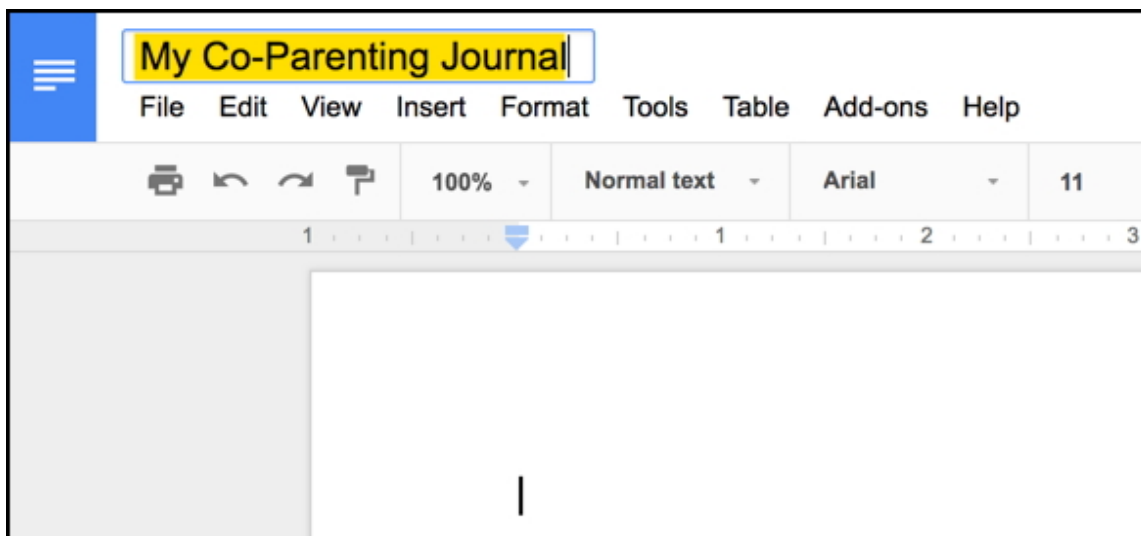
This will bring up a new Google Doc.

A Google Doc is just like a Word document, except it's automatically saved in the Cloud by Google. In fact, it's so automatic that you never need to hit the "Save" button frequently like you do in Microsoft Office.

The first thing you'll want to do is title your journal. It doesn't matter what you call it, just as long as you can remember what it is.

For the sake of this example, I am calling mine "My Co-Parenting Journal". To change this, simply click inside the ghosted words "Untitled Document" and Google will give you the ability to type in that space.

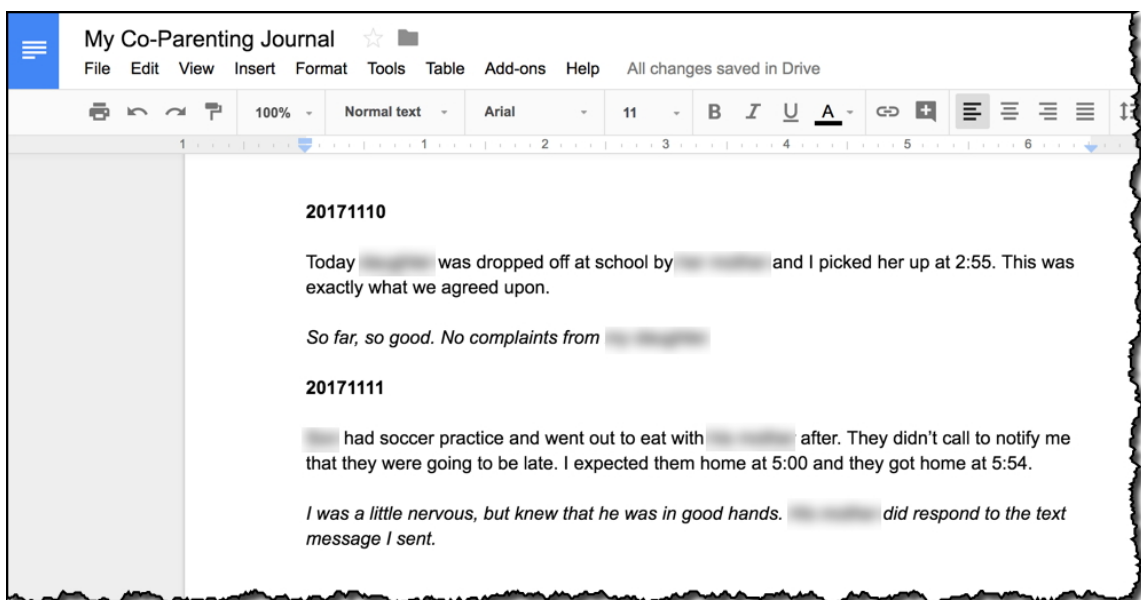
Remember that this is your document, so name it whatever you'd like.



The middle section is where you can type things out.

Again, this is your journal so feel free to write as much detail as you want or as little as you need to recall the events related to your Custody Agreement. Keep in mind that the idea here is to note what works and what doesn't work in your Custody Agreement. The intention here isn't a "his fault" or "her blunder", rather an objective description of what happened. Then log your emotions and how you felt.

Here's a snippet from an example journal I wrote. I set it up with the date being in bold, the "what is so" section in the middle and how I felt about it in italics:



I would highly encourage you not to share this journal with anyone. It's really just a matter of logging for yourself what happened within the context of your Custody Agreement.

And like I mentioned before, do this for a minimum of 30 days. If it takes 21 days to change a habit, there is a good chance it's going to take twice as long to change the routine you had around your children.

I would encourage you to stick to the "putting into action" part, and these two tools - the shared Calendar and your Co-Parenting journal - are ways to keep yourself and your Co-Parent on track.

At this point, you might have a good idea of what works and what doesn't work, but please give it time. There are going to be missed pick-ups, late starts at Soccer practice and, yes, even some hurt feelings along the way.

Hang in there, you are doing great so far.

At this point, you are well over half-way through the "Custody Without Courts" process.

You've got tools that have assisted you with some emotional challenges, you've put together an amazing Custody Plan with your Co-Parent and you've begun to put that plan into action.

Unlike most things in your life, there is no "end goal" for this. In the case of a Custody Agreement, it's really the journey that truly is the goal. And in writing this book, it's been my mission to create an adventure that is as pain-free and stress-free as possible.

You'll never NOT have stress or frustration, but it's been my job to make it as comfortable as can be. And when you are dealing with other humans, you've found that communication is really key to getting your ideas and thoughts across.

With all of this in mind, we're going to move on to the fourth and final section of this book. We're going to talk about modifying our Custody Agreement.

## Section 4: Modifying Your Custody Agreement

According to Wikipedia, it was Heraclitus of Ephesus who wrote “The only thing that is constant is change” and while this was over 2000 years ago, it’s still true to this day.

Over the years I’ve modified the Custody Plan with my Co-Parent at least once a year for almost 14 years. This wasn’t out of spite or anger, but rather it came from a place of being “workable” for me, my Co-Parent and our children.

After all, as kids get older their needs change.

At the same time, in our role as parents we are continuing to get older, and hopefully wiser as well, and *our* needs change along this journey too.

So, I would encourage you to not be shy of changing up your Custody Agreement such that it continues to benefit everyone involved.

By the time you are ready to make adjustments, you’ll have a good sense of what is workable and what isn’t.

Make sure you adjust your agreement together with your Co-Parent and that it’s done in the shared Document so that there are no surprises.

Use the same “built-in” integrity that we talked about in the second section of being able to create something that works in your world.

And then, make it a habit to check-in to see if everyone is still on-board with what is going on.

As with anything you do, something that is done in repetition is going to become even more and more ingrained into your everyday endeavors.

Regardless of how smooth or bumpy putting your Custody Agreement into action has been, remember that it’s critical to check-in with your Co-Parent.

Since you have this history of breaking up and then coming together to make this Agreement “workable”, by now you should have a pretty decent line of communication open. Even if you don’t, it still never hurts to ask them if anything needs to be adjusted.

But when it comes to the actual revision, we’re going to take it beyond just a quick check-in.

Some folks offer up information, sometimes too much information, about how they feel and how easy or hard things have been. Other folks find it difficult to open up and will close themselves off. Either way, reach out to your Co-Parent regularly and see how they are doing as it relates to this Custody Agreement you’ve created together.

When you go to make the adjustments to your Custody Agreement, like I said, make sure that you do them in your Google Doc and that revision history is turned on. (As I mentioned before, revision history is turned on by default, so unless you explicitly turned it off it will be active).

This is important for the same reason I listed in the second section where we actually made the Agreement: It's because there is a history and documented record of that change.

So, how do we go about adjusting this "grand" Child Custody plan?

Well, it's done really on two levels.

The first is on a logistical level. Now that you have a sense of child pickup times and extracurricular involvement, you should know if a "change-order" is going to be doable.

The second level is going to be coming from a place of authenticity and integrity with your Co-Parent. This is where both hindsight and experience come into play.

## **Hindsight and Experience**

There is no doubt that completing the first three sections of this book made an impact on your life.

In addition to the new agreement that is now in place is going to come a duty to revise and check back, noting what works and what doesn't.

For my journey, the revisions almost came naturally. This included times when my Co-Parent moved to different Apartments, when my child changed school (from Elementary to Middle to High School), and during the times of different extra-curricular activities.

And I hope that your adjustments go as smoothly.

When I look back, these were minor revisions to our original agreement, but they would have seemed pretty big at the time we created the Custody Agreement.

For you and your Co-Parent, it might not be as cut-and-dry as this. Maybe you are going to revise the agreement based on a new romantic relationship or even another child on the way.

The point is that life changes and you need to change with it.

Make it a point to go back to the Custody Agreement journal you created in the third section.

Review what didn't work when you first started the agreement and what doesn't work now.

Another example I can give is that my work hours changed and suddenly I had to hire a sitter for three months to be home when my kids arrived from school. While there was the logistical aspect of paying someone and making sure they made it home on time, there was also the integrity piece of letting my Co-Parent know that there was a change of plans.

This is going to be the first step.

Next, repeat the coffee-house meeting that you had in Section 2.

And before you even make the date for your revision, look back at the Journal you kept from Section 3. Try your best to synthesize your ideas about what to change and I'll bet that the things that greatly worried you at the start aren't what your concerns are now.

I've never been able to affect lasting change with my Custody Agreement by doing it over the phone or text messages. Any revision, no matter how major or minor, should be done in-person. I won't mention the reasons why here, but let's just say they are for the same original reasons in Section 2.

The third step is going to be sticking to your integrity. One important aspect of sticking to your integrity, as a mature person, is going to be avoiding the temptation of withholding. I saved this for the last section, but it's one of my favorite distinctions to discuss.



## Smuggling Your Secret Stash

Every human has secrets.

These secrets could be cheating on a test in middle school or cheating on a spouse. They are both things you haven't told anyone and they are both equally as destructive to your inner psyche.

An often overlooked form of destruction is 'withholding'.

Withholding is a form of emotional robbery because when we withhold we don't tell another person the entire truth about how we feel or what we've done.

This can take on many forms, like telling a 'half-truth' or just not saying anything at all. This can slowly chip away at your integrity which will eventually cause you to be inauthentic as a person.

Withholding is especially insidious because we've convinced ourselves that "*no one cares, so why mention it anyway?*"

I chose this as the last and final distinction I wanted to share because it's the most powerful one that I am aware of.

Once you get this handled, you are going to have full self-expression and be able to tell your Co-Parent (and your Partner) anything, without any fear of judgement or resentment from them.

It's a big promise, but one that will change your life forever.

## **Determine If You Are Withholding**

The first step is to determine if you are withholding.

I do this by asking myself “*Am I giving the silent treatment?*”

Any time that I purposely don't want to talk to someone, it usually means that I know something I don't want them to know. For me, this has never been out of boredom, but often as a direct result of not wanting to express something to them. Most of the time, this is based on fear and being afraid of their reactions. I'm afraid I'll hurt them, or “say the wrong thing”. If you've ever experienced this, you know how frustrating this is.

The second thing to do, to determine if you are withholding, is to pay attention if you aren't offering support.

If someone reaches out to you or is beating-around-the-bush asking for advice and you are ignoring them, there is a good chance that you are intentionally withholding from them.

Once you have determined if you are withholding from someone, the next step is to stop concealing your emotions and begin Self-Expression. By being Self-Expressed you can end up working *with* someone, like your Co-Parent, and making sure that adjustments to your Custody Agreement are going to serve everyone.

## **Long Term Working Together With Your Co-Parent**

The second step is to work together with your Co-Parent.

In fact, I would even recommend really putting yourself out there and telling them that you are working on being as transparent and “real” with them as possible. This has a two-fold benefit: They are going to respect your honesty and be more likely to take notice of their own withholding.

In my experience, working long-term with my Co-Parent has looked like this:

The first thing to share is speaking (unrealistic) fears out loud.

By speaking our fears, it gets ideas out of our heads and into the words we speak. Often, fears will sound trivial and almost ridiculous once you get them out of your brain. Sometimes just having this perspective is going to give you insight into the workability of a situation. As humans, we’re poor judges of being able to predict the future. More often than not, we’re way off on our emotional estimation of a situation or reaction someone is going to have.

Secondly, I intentionally make myself more vulnerable to others, specifically to my Co-Parent. What this looks like for me might look like over-communicating to others, but in my case it’s being as honest and expressive as I possibly can with her.

I want you to really encourage you to make an inquiry and ask yourself if you are withholding and to whom. It doesn’t really make sense to figure out the “why”, but rather to acknowledge that it’s happening and then set yourself up to embrace your self-expression.

You’ll be glad you did!

## Congratulations

Before I complete this book, I want to congratulate you on taking a **stand**.

You took a stand to get a Child Custody Agreement completed in such a way as to honor your Children, honor Yourself and honor your Co-Parent.

Life doesn't always work out the way we expect it to, but that doesn't mean we need to stay in negative or painful circumstances. Both you and I know this first-hand.

You took a stand and you dealt with your current circumstances in a way that was powerful. You became, quite literally, unstoppable in the face of what occurred in your life.

That deserves a standing ovation, my friend. So, for that, I give you applause.

I want to also take this time to acknowledge you for sticking to this and taking that stand. You really are the reason I wrote this book. I wrote this for you to get the same peace of mind and comfort in knowing that you chose your child first.

It might not have been easy. I know that with my Previous Partner there was quite a bit of baggage that I was carrying around with me when I started. But over the years it got better, and before I knew it, we'd created a wonderful agreement that put our child first above everything else in our lives.

Thank you for your participation and thank you for your integrity in reading this book and putting my suggestions into the real world. You really are a creator of love in your life and the lives of others.

If you have any questions about anything in this book, please feel free to write me directly. My email address is [Thom@CustodyWithoutCourts.com](mailto:Thom@CustodyWithoutCourts.com).

I welcome any and all feedback.

Thanks again for reading "Custody Without Courts", it's been an honor to serve you.



## Appendix 1: The Printable Custody Agreement

Time Table		
Insurance		
Legal		
Education		
Child Care		
Exchanges		
Guidelines		
Travel		

## Appendix 2: Printable Custody Matrix

Time Table	Insurance	Legal	Education	Child Care	Exchanges	Guidelines	Travel



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