



Communication between separated parents and the schools

Initial draft discussion document on facilitating and improving the quality of Communication between separated parents and the schools their children attend.

(Version 1.1 10/11/02)

“Back to School”

September's over, the evenings are shortening and the long winter evenings are back once again. The kids are back to school over a month now and they are mostly settled into their routine. For many separated parents the school issues are yet another potential battleground, where the parental conflict is played out once again and the power relationships are restated. Sadly, the Sole Custody model (which our state services and the various professional feeders have propagated against the best interests of the children) creates Dominant positions for the sole custodian and a Subservient position for the Access-parent.

Over the last decade Parental Equality has heard many of the problems which arise in relation to schooling. For a non-custodial parent, the experience is often one of feeling marginalized from being involved with their children's education. When they attempt to connect with the school or the teachers or attend at the school to meet the kids there is often tension, coldness or outright rejection. Sometimes in hurt and frustration the non custodial parent responds angrily and the stress levels escalate—The bottom line is that the non custodial parent is driven further away from the process of education of their children.

Suggestions for reflection critiques and development.

Here are some thoughts on dealing with the education issues which may help non custodial parents in their struggle to participate fully in their children's educational development.

- 1) Each parent who was legally married is an automatic guardian of their children. Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution states that:-

“The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children”.

Note that this right/duty is inalienable (it cannot be removed). In the Irish Version of the Constitution, which takes precedence in legal interpretation, the role of guardian is stated even more strongly, the translation being that the State guarantees in fact 'Not to

INTERFERE' with the inalienable rights/duties of guardians (Ráthaíonn an Stát gan cur isteach ar).

This constitutional guarantee is irrespective of whether the parents are separated, divorced, remarried etc. Therefore, after a separation a non-custodial (previously married) parent retains his/her status with regard to the educational (among other) development of their children. Unfortunately, this constitutional provision is neither well broadcast or acknowledged after separation. However, I suggest that you might cut and paste it onto your own desktop and print it out in big type, because this is the fundamental legitimisation of your role in your children's education.

- 2) After separation, I suggest that you type a letter to the principal of the school/s that your children attend. Lay out each point in a separate paragraph, number them and leave double line spacing between each paragraph.
- 3) You should courteously introduce yourself, identifying yourself and your children (sometimes the custodial parent may have presented the child/ren to the school in another name format or in a double-barrelled form).
- 4) You should include the name of the other parent and provide contact details, address, phones (work/home/mobile), emails etc for yourself and an address for the other parent
- 5) (NOTE:- You should not provide phone numbers, emails etc for the other parent unless they have previously assented to you doing so. An address is sufficient and non-invasive and facilitates the school if they wish to make contact with the other parent).
- 6) Express clearly in your letter your intent to continue to maintain and develop a continuous strong engagement in your child/ren's education, and indicate your desire to nurture a partnership with the school in order to benefit your child.
- 7) Politely, but assertively, do request written information about the school's policy/ies in regard to dealing with separated situations, communicating with parents, sending copies of schools reports, notices of parent-teacher meetings etc.
- 8) Clearly state that you wish to have duplicate copies of all communications from the school to be sent separately to both addresses, and suggest that instead of the child/ren being given notes to take home in their bags that, in order to avoid confusion and hence possible unnecessary tension between the estranged parents, the school might kindly send all communications by post with separate copies to both guardians.
- 9) Suggest that if it is necessary for the school staff to make phone contact with the guardians (use the word guardian specifically) that they might ensure that both guardians are called separately.
- 10) Ask if there are any extra financial considerations which might arise from your requests and offer to pay half of any costs which might accrue (Such a cost should be miniscule in the context of the school's educational budget but be courteous enough to offer it nonetheless).
- 11) Request information and details about the school's management structure, the board of management, the various school committees, such as a parent's committee etc.
- 12) If at all possible make the time and offer to serve on one/some of these committees. This will provide you with close contact with the school and with your child/ren's development.
- 13) If you have access to a resource, skillset etc that could be of value to the school do offer to assist the school in any way you can. Note that this is not a bribe but rather something all parents should consider as a way of supporting their children's school experience.
- 14) If the school have fundraisers, trips etc., offer to get involved and to help out.

- 15) Ask if there are any specific contributions which parents are expected to make towards school running costs (these are not uncommon in our supposedly FREE educational system), school jumpers tours etc and offer to pay half of such costs directly to the school (either pay by cheque or get and keep receipts).
- 16) Ask for copies of class timetables and study arrangements (particularly for secondary schools) and exam results etc to be sent to both guardians.
- 17) Keep a copy of the letter and send a copy to the other parent as a matter of courtesy and of recognising their equal guardianship role.
- 18) End your letter by acknowledging the changing role of society, the consequential complexities and potential embarrassments and extra attention to detail that the reality increasing number of family separations may cause for the school. Remind the recipient that the child's school experience is critical to your child's present and future well being.
- 19) Include the Constitutional reference given above at the end of the letter and as a P.S do draw the principal's attention to it in a straightforward and helpful way.
- 20) NOTE:- If you are an unmarried father you don't have the same constitutional rights as a once married father. You should ensure that you are instated as a legal guardian by the courts (see Parental Equality's Shared Parenting Program for further details). Once you are a guardian then the letter above is just the same for you.
- 21) Open a file and keep track of correspondence with the school. Keep all letters, school reports etc. (Your child/ren will be grateful for the historical record when they get to forty).
- 22) If it becomes necessary for you to meet with the principal or school authorities as a result of the letter and while you are in the early stages of establishing a viable working partnership with the school, consider taking along a friend who has read the correspondence and understands the issues. It would be helpful if they know something about the school processes (for example you might approach one of the parents representatives on the school's parent's committees or on the board of management and ask for their assistance).
- 23) Bringing someone with you who is not emotionally involved and who has experience of negotiating can help divert possible tensions etc.
- 24) My experience has been that Principals and schools generally are struggling to cope with all the pressures and fall-out that family problems bring and that sometimes their response to a non custodial parent's desire to engage actively in the child's education is to brush the parent off as a quick fix. However if you approach the school in a clear, calm, coherent, courteous but assertive manner, and if others are simultaneously taking this approach then the school system will adapt to welcoming the partnership approach. After all, many teachers often complain about the lack of parental interest and involvement in their child/ren's education.
- 25) In order for Parental Equality to support this change in the educational process at a systemic level I suggest that you should send a report of your experiences in email to secretary@parentalequality.ie
- 26) Once again if you have further suggestions that we can disseminate on the PE website send them to the secretary. Our combined experience can help others who are just getting into this process.

Finally, as your children are once again getting back into the learning mode of the school year, you yourself might consider some educational opportunity for yourself. The Shared Parenting Program run by Parental Equality is a very well received training program which helps

participants consider and reflect on many of the issues facing them after separation. See details elsewhere on the www.parentalequality.ie website

Liam Ó Gógáin (Chairman PE) 9th Oct 2002

PS:-

The initial thoughts above were intended to be a catalyst for discussion on improving a situation which for both parent and teachers is often a very tense, frustrating and confusing and which for the children are often upsetting, confusing and raises issues of suppression of feelings and divided loyalties . Initial reaction from readers have raised issues including Communion and Confirmation arrangements and preparation as these are seminal events in a child's developments in Ireland.

Readers have suggested disseminating the document to teachers and their representatives, to politicians, clergy, parents groups etc and I would hope that readers will freely pass it on. Your feedback, insights, reflections on personal experiences, comments, challenges, suggestions will form the organic development of this discussion. Please email your correspondence to chairman@parentalequality.ie.

Liamog (10/11/02)