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Quick Facts: Parenting Time

This Quick Facts guide provides information about the relationship between parenting time and child support.

The Child Support Program¹ is a successful federal-state-tribal partnership that seeks to promote economic stability for children whose parents live apart. In FY 2018, \$34. billion dollars was collected in 13.9 million cases for 14.7 million children².

Parenting time is defined as the amount of time a child spends with each parent as specified in a parenting plan or court order. While child support and parenting time are separate rights usually governed by different state statutes, research shows emotional support and financial support are interrelated. Parents obligated to pay child support are more likely to stay involved in their children's lives and meet their financial responsibilities when parenting time arrangements are established.

Married parents ending their relationship typically address parenting time as part of the divorce process. However, unmarried parents generally do not have a systematic avenue for resolving parenting time concerns because child support and parenting time must be addressed in separate legal proceedings. Further, child support programs do not have jurisdiction in custody and visitation matters, leaving families receiving services to resolve parenting time issues on their own.

In September 2014, Congress enacted the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act³ that included a Sense of Congress (Section 303) expressing the "important goal" of incorporating parenting time with strong family violence safeguards in child support orders. Along these lines, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement has assisted states with grant opportunities facilitating parenting time agreements. The Access and Visitation grant provides \$10 million annually divided among the states to administer programs that promote paying parents' access to their children. The 2012 Parenting Time Opportunities for Children (PTOC) in the Child Support Program grant focused on developing strategies for establishing parenting time orders at the same time as initial child support orders. On October 1, 2019, OCSE published a research brief⁴, that summarizes the findings from this five-site multi-year pilot grant. PTOC demonstrated that child support agencies can incorporate parenting time orders in the child support establishment process. The protocols developed in the pilot sites included family violence safeguards in the process. Evaluators of the PTOC sites confirmed that parents appreciated the opportunity to address parenting time along with establishing the child support order.

¹ Created by Title IV-D of the Social Security Act

² www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/fy2015_preliminary.pdf

³ www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980

⁴ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/parenting-time-opportunities-for-children>





While most states have an adjustment in the child support guidelines for parenting time, some states have developed resources to address child support and parenting time issues simultaneously. Examples of parenting time initiatives include:

- The Texas Access and Visitation Hotline provides parents with phone access to attorneys who provide legal information related to parenting time issues. Additionally, Texas law requires that parenting time arrangements are established concurrently with the initial child support order.
- Oregon offers an online parenting time calculator to help parents determine the average time a child spends with each parent, and how that factors into a support obligation. It also has an interactive tool to create a detailed parenting plan that can be used to obtain a court-ordered plan.
- Indiana uses Access and Visitation federal grant funds to run a statewide parenting helpline housed in the state's child support program. Indiana routinely establishes parenting time orders when the parties agree on a plan. Indiana's Parenting Time Helpline is staffed by attorneys and is available to anyone with questions about the parenting time process.
- To encourage frequent contact between a child and each parent, Florida passed legislation in 2017 allowing agreed-upon parenting time plans to be incorporated by reference into administrative final order for paternity or child support and judicial enforcement orders.

By offering family-centered services, child support programs help bridge the gap between emotional support and financial support, which translates to improved child well-being.

