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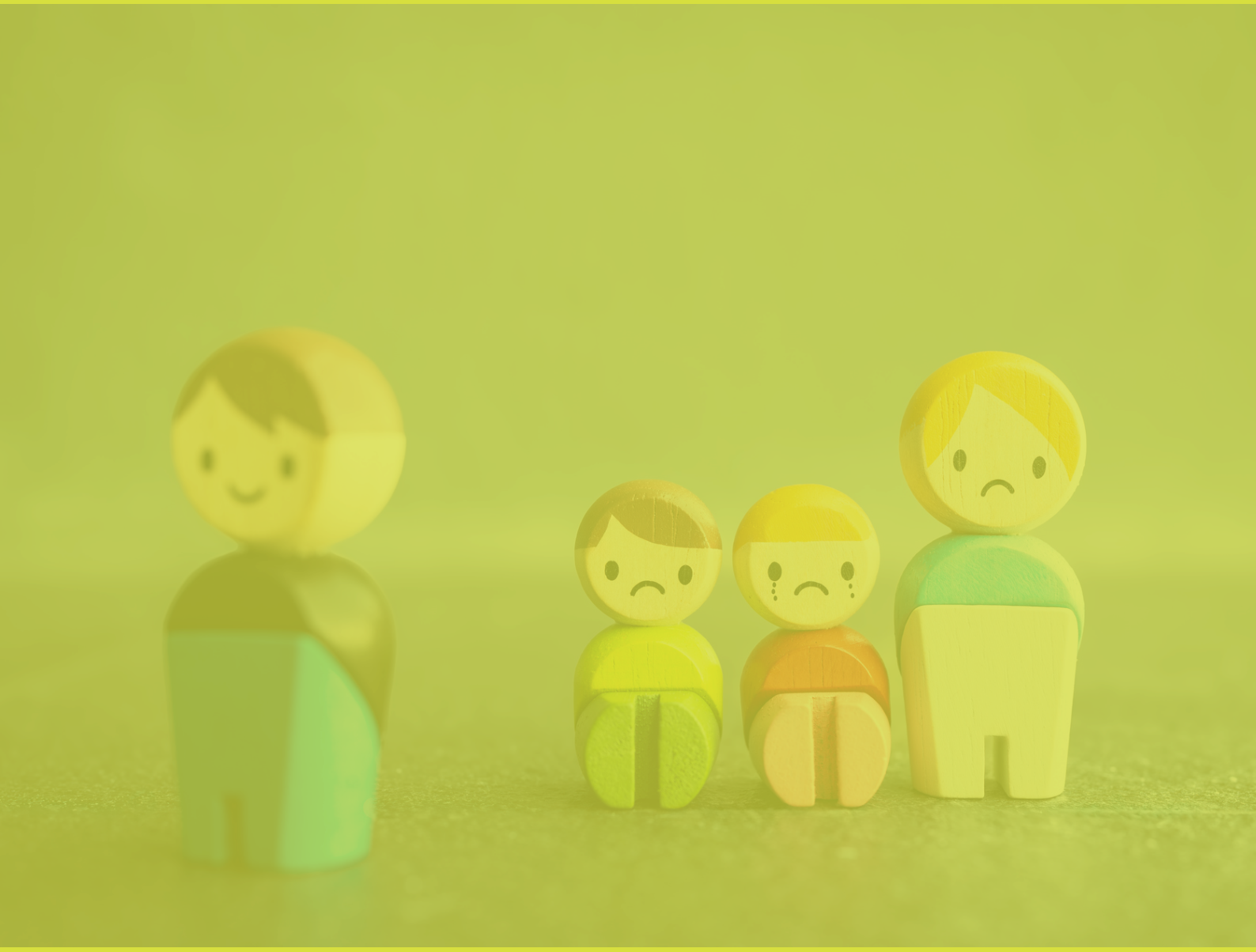

The Christmas Child Arrangements Checklist

7 things to agree before Christmas – and what to do when your ex won't cooperate

Christmas should be about making memories, not managing conflict.

For separated parents, agreeing who the children will spend Christmas with isn't always straightforward.

Even when you have the best intentions, disagreements about dates, handovers, travel and family traditions can quickly create tension.

This checklist will help you think through the practical arrangements, avoid misunderstandings and recognise when it might be time to seek specialist advice.

You don't have to agree on everything, but having clear arrangements can make Christmas more manageable for everyone, especially your children.

1

Agree the dates and times

The first step is being clear about when your children will spend time with each parent.

- Christmas Eve and Christmas Day
- Boxing Day and the days between Christmas and New Year
- New Year's Eve and New Year's Day
- The rest of the school holidays
- Whether arrangements will alternate in future years

Something to consider: Does Christmas Day need to be shared every year, or would alternating Christmas and Boxing Day provide more stability?

2

Plan the handovers

Even when dates are agreed, the practicalities of collecting and returning children can cause disagreements.

- Agree exact collection and return times
- Decide where handovers will take place
- Confirm who is responsible for transport
- Consider what happens if someone is delayed

Something to consider: If communication is difficult, would a neutral handover location or another appropriate arrangement help reduce conflict?

3

Discuss holidays and travel

Planning to visit relatives or take the children away over Christmas?

- Share relevant travel dates and arrangements
- Check whether consent is required for travel abroad
- Review any existing court order
- Agree how the children will stay in touch with the other parent

Something to consider: Taking children abroad can involve specific legal requirements. Don't assume that having parental responsibility automatically gives you permission to travel without the other parent's consent.

4

Agree how you'll communicate

Christmas arrangements can quickly become stressful when communication breaks down.

- Agree how you'll communicate about the children
- Keep important arrangements confirmed in writing
- Discuss how genuine last-minute changes will be handled
- Agree suitable times for calls or video contact with the other parent

Something to consider: Keeping communication brief, factual and focused on the children can help avoid unnecessary arguments. Where there are safety concerns or controlling behaviour, direct communication may not be appropriate.

5

Check any existing court orders

If you already have a Child Arrangements Order, make sure you understand what it says about Christmas and school holidays.

- Check the arrangements set out in the order
- Identify whether special Christmas arrangements override the usual routine
- Confirm any proposed changes in writing
- Seek advice if the order is being ignored or disputed

Something to consider: An informal agreement to change arrangements doesn't automatically amend a court order. If disagreements are ongoing, legal advice can help you understand your options.

6

Listen to your children

Christmas can bring mixed emotions for children whose parents have separated.

- Consider your children's ages, needs and routines
- Listen to how they feel without asking them to choose sides
- Avoid making promises before arrangements are confirmed
- Reassure them that both parents are responsible for making arrangements

Something to consider: Children's wishes matter, but they shouldn't carry the responsibility for resolving disagreements between adults.

7

Have a plan if things go wrong

Even carefully planned arrangements can change.

- Agree how unexpected changes will be communicated
- Keep a record of important discussions and agreements
- Know what to do if arrangements are refused or repeatedly changed
- Consider whether professional support or legal advice may be needed

Something to consider: If you are concerned that your ex may not honour an agreement, don't wait until Christmas Eve to find out what your options are.

What if your ex won't cooperate?

You may have tried everything to reach an agreement and still find yourself facing uncertainty.

Perhaps your ex is refusing to discuss Christmas, repeatedly changing arrangements or using time with the children to exert pressure.

You don't have to keep having the same argument without understanding your legal options.

Depending on your circumstances, there may be several ways forward.

Negotiation through solicitors

A specialist family lawyer can help you communicate proposals, clarify expectations and work towards an agreement without unnecessary confrontation.

Mediation or other non-court options

Where appropriate and safe, mediation or another form of non-court dispute resolution may help parents reach practical arrangements.

Court proceedings

If agreement isn't possible, it may be necessary to consider a court application. Existing orders may also need to be reviewed or enforced.

The right approach will depend on your circumstances, including any safeguarding concerns, existing orders and the children's welfare.

When should you seek advice?

If arrangements are repeatedly being changed, contact is being withheld, an existing order isn't being followed or your ex's behaviour is making co-parenting difficult, specialist advice can help you understand where you stand.

The earlier you understand your options, the more opportunity there may be to resolve disagreements constructively. Court timescales can be lengthy, and a resolution before Christmas cannot be guaranteed.

Christmas is one day. Your children's future matters all year.

Difficult Christmas arrangements are often part of a wider problem.

If you're facing repeated disagreements about school holidays, birthdays, contact or everyday parenting arrangements, getting specialist advice could help you establish greater clarity and stability for the future.

At Harrogate Family Law, we understand how upsetting disputes involving children can be, particularly when you're dealing with an uncooperative or controlling former partner.

Our specialist family lawyers provide clear, practical advice to help you understand your options and take control of what happens next.

Let's talk about your next steps

We offer a fixed-price, one-hour initial meeting with a specialist family lawyer, where you can discuss your circumstances, receive tailored advice and explore the most appropriate way forward.

Call 01423 594680
Email enquiries@harrogatefamilylaw.co.uk
Visit harrogatefamilylaw.co.uk

This checklist provides general information about child arrangements in England and Wales. It is not a substitute for legal advice tailored to your circumstances.