

Supporting Split Families

PLEASE NOTE

This is operational guidance, not legal advice. Custody laws vary by state and case. For any situations involving a court order, law enforcement or active legal dispute, contact your center's attorney and ensure your state licensing rules are followed.

Separation is hard on the whole family, the child included. Despite this, most centers only plan for it after something's gone wrong: a confrontation at pickup, a court order nobody told the front desk about. Here we outline some habits that help prevent that. From the child's experience to the guardians' – plus the records you keep – this sensitive situation requires a holistic approach.

Before you 'know' about it

If a member of staff suspects anything to have changed in a family's situation, it's important to begin keeping a record. These notes do not need to be extensive or intrusive, it is not your role to play detective, but they do need to be factual, accurate and time-stamped.

Notes to consider taking include:

- Any hostility or major disagreements between parents, in-person or via chat
- New adults given pick-up or drop-off authorization
- Requests made to withhold information from one guardian or to change established contact methods
- A change to billing or contact details affecting only one guardian
- Any mentions of legal proceeding, protective order or law enforcement
 - **Any safeguarding concern regarding the child(ren) must be reported in line with your policy**

This record keeping lays the groundwork for managing the school's relationship with the family down the line. In the many cases they're barely needed, but for the cases that do become challenging, early documentation is essential.

HOW PLAYGROUND HELPS

Every guardian is recorded with a relationship and a pickup-authorization status. This is visible to staff at sign-in/out, so no one is relying on memory of who can and can't be there.

Remember also that a guardian's profile has a Post a Note option that's always staff-view-only – perfect for logging requests, observations or difficult conversations.

Championing the child

- **Keep routines consistent.** When there are shifts in dynamic at home, your center may be the most stable place the child experiences for a while – hold off on big changes if you can, try to keep favorite toys and seating where they always are.
- **Prepare the child before pickup** for who's coming, especially if the routine has changed, new guardians are collecting or they're transitioning between homes.
- **Offer small choices** where you can (which snack, which toy first), this helps to give young children independence and a sense of control.
- **Treat both parents the same.** Stay warm, neutral and consistent, if anything needs escalating there are systems for that. You don't need details and whatever is shared with you should stay confidential.

Once you're notified

Now you know that changes need to be made, it's advisable to organize a sit-down meeting with both parents up front. Here you can agree from the start on a pickup schedule, authorized guardians, billing, communications and so on. It is essential to involve both parents equally in decision making, until they explicitly outline otherwise. In the same way you provide stability for the child, you're often a stable and consistent place for families too.

- **Re-confirm every guardian's relationship, permissions and pickup status** – an out-of-date roster often isn't spotted until there's an issue with unexpected pickups, messages and meetings.
- **Get custody agreements or court orders in writing.** These should be handed from the guardian to the director or chief administrator, not secondhand via other staff members.
- **Address billing quickly** as many families will need costs split by agreement or income share rather than one combined bill. Set this up at the meeting to ensure a clear, agreed approach from the start.

HOW PLAYGROUND HELPS

A Split Family tool (student's profile → Settings → Account) divides billing into two named guardian groups, each with their own payment methods and view of charges – the combined "All" tab and anything unassigned stay admin-view-only. Existing charges get assigned by payment method or however you choose; subsidy transactions are the one exception, always flagged afterward for manual review. On a guardian's profile, the staff-only Post a Note option (never visible to the guardian) supports a tag – like "Custody Notes" – and a file attachment via the paperclip icon, so a court order can sit right alongside the note itself.

Your role is to deliver calm and consistent care.

A strong administration system makes this infinitely easier.

If you're facing the complexity of split families, ask a rep how Playground can help you.

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