



Parenting Time Opportunities for Children Research Brief

Summary

Although parenting time is legally separate from child support, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement has a role in facilitating healthy parent-child relationships. Children are better off when both of their parents are positively involved in their lives and providing for them emotionally and financially. Additionally, parents who are involved with their children are more likely to pay child support, and parents who pay child support are more likely to stay involved.

The Parenting Time Opportunities for Children (PTOC) pilot demonstrated that child support agencies can incorporate parenting time orders into the child support establishment process with appropriate family violence safeguards. Evaluators of the project sites confirmed that parents appreciate the opportunity to address parenting time and feel that it increases the fairness of child support. Furthermore, PTOC appears to help some parents with improved relationships, more time with their children, and some small increases in child support compliance.

About this pilot

PTOC was a multi-year pilot program launched in 2012. Under PTOC, five child support agencies tested and evaluated strategies to create formal parenting time arrangements at the same time a child support order was being established.

PTOC pilot sites:

- California (San Diego County)
- Florida (Miami-Dade County)
- Indiana (Monroe County)
- Ohio (Cuyahoga, Fairfield, Franklin, Licking, Montgomery, Pickaway, Stark, and Wayne counties)
- Oregon (statewide)

Parenting Time Opportunities for Children Research Brief

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) launched the Parenting Time Opportunities for Children (PTOC) pilot program in 2012, awarding grants to child support agencies to develop, implement, and evaluate procedures for establishing parenting time orders along with new child support orders.

OCSE funded five PTOC pilot sites:

- California (San Diego County)
- Florida (Miami-Dade County)
- Indiana (Monroe County)
- Ohio (Cuyahoga, Fairfield, Franklin, Licking, Montgomery, Pickaway, Stark, and Wayne counties)
- Oregon (statewide)

These pilot sites were originally funded for three years, federal fiscal years (FFY) 2012 to 2015; four of the sites were extended for an additional year, FFY 2016.

Issue Background

Children are better off when both of their parents are positively involved in their lives and providing for them emotionally and financially. The national child support program plays a critical role in assuring that parents who live apart from their children meet their financial obligations to their children. Legally, parenting time is distinct and separate from child support, however, the two issues are strongly connected. Parents who are involved with their children are more likely to pay child support, and parents who pay child support are more likely to stay involved.

The Access and Visitation Program

In recognition of how important it is that children have the opportunity to spend time with their parents, Congress established the Access and Visitation (AV) program in 1996. Administered by OCSE, the AV program has an annual appropriation of approximately \$10 million, which provides funding to all 54 states and territories. States and territories use these funds to provide a range of needed services to support positive interactions between parents and their children.

Since 1997, the AV program has served over 1.7 million parents. In FFY 2017, more than 93,000 parents and caregivers were served. In contrast with the more than 28 million parents receiving child support services, the AV program has limited reach. There is no systematic, efficient mechanism to establish parenting time agreements for many families receiving child support services.

Congressional Support for Parenting Time Arrangements

In 2014, Congress further expressed its support for parenting time programs in the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-183):

“It is the sense of the Congress that— (1) establishing parenting time arrangements when obtaining child support orders is an important goal which should be accompanied by strong family violence safeguards; and (2) States should use existing funding sources to support the establishment of parenting time arrangements, including child support incentives, Access and Visitation Grants, and Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood Grants.”

The PTOC Pilot

PTOC was designed to test and refine models to fill this gap where systematically integrating parenting time arrangements into the child support order establishment process is appropriate and cost-neutral.

PTOC pilot sites were tasked with establishing a minimum of 300 new parenting time orders per site. The five jurisdictions varied in how order establishment was accomplished: through a judicial process, an administrative process, or through a quasi-administrative process. Details on how PTOC was implemented in each site are provided in Appendix A.

Staff training was required for all PTOC sites. Included in the case selection and establishment process was a domestic violence assessment to improve identification of parents’ domestic violence concerns and to connect parents to domestic violence services when it was identified. Caseworkers, mediators, and court staff were trained in assessing cases for domestic violence.

Common Insights Across PTOC Sites

Positive Relationship Effects

PTOC appeared to have positive effects on parent-to-parent and parent-to-child relationships. Sites reported increases in parenting time for noncustodial parents, and improved relationships and communication between custodial and noncustodial parents.

Minimal Costs for Securing Parenting Time Orders

Parenting time order processes can be successfully implemented with few additional costs to child support order establishment. Most sites have continued to offer parenting time orders even after their grant funding expired.

High Rates of Domestic Violence Disclosure and Expanded Screening

A significant number of parents identified domestic violence concerns during child support case initiation – more than sites anticipated. With improved screening as implemented by the PTOC pilot sites, more than one in three parents disclosed domestic violence involving the other parent.

All sites adopted domestic violence screening for parents in all child support cases in their caseloads, not just for those cases screened for PTOC. By developing stronger domestic violence protocols in partnership with their local domestic violence community partners, the pilot site programs received positive recognition and increased trust from local social service agencies.

Take-up of Parenting Time Orders

There was initially less demand for parenting time orders than anticipated. In San Diego County, it was determined that most of those parents who declined PTOC services already had an existing informal parenting time agreement. However, as site staff became more comfortable talking about parenting time and offering parenting time services, participation in the program increased.

After participating in PTOC, parents were much more likely to have a parenting time order than non-participants. For example, in Indiana, participants were twice as likely to have a parenting time order when compared to parents who didn't access PTOC services.

Implementation Findings

Each PTOC site was required to contract with an independent evaluator to conduct process evaluations. A key goal of these evaluations was to document how PTOC was implemented and describe any modifications, challenges, and successes that could be shared with other jurisdictions interested in replicating a similar program. Below are some common themes and strategies that emerged.

Parenting Order Flowcharts Key to Planning

At least three sites created detailed flowcharts to help in the design and planning of their projects. These flowcharts allowed agencies to plan the structure and operations of the program, assign appropriate roles and responsibilities, and better understand the goals of PTOC and its impact on families in the community. The Miami-Dade, Monroe, and San Diego project sites included copies of their flowcharts in their final reports.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges

Recruitment of eligible parents proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Evaluators found that problems with recruitment were linked to child support staff's discomfort in offering parenting time services, the requirement that parents opt-in for services, and the associated perception by parents that they needed special services. There was also reported distrust from parents who had previously been told that the child support program did not address parenting time, where now parents were offered these services by the child support agency.

Two sites employed some effective strategies to help improve recruitment:

- Miami-Dade County created a specialized intake team where staff would explain the benefits of the program to eligible parents.
- San Diego County implemented a "warm-handoff" procedure where staff would walk participants to the family law facilitator's office.

Sites also developed recruitment materials, such as brochures, posters, and domestic violence information cards. See Appendix B for examples from Montgomery County, Ohio, and San Diego County, California.

Some sites also had challenges with retention. These issues were related to extra steps required to receive services. In Oregon, accessing parenting time services required parents to go to an outside provider (mediator), rather than receiving the service in house.

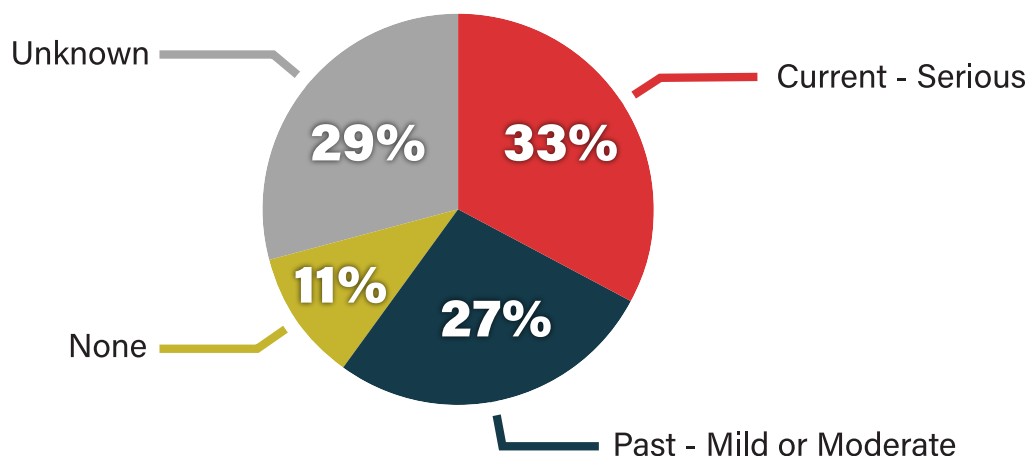
Prevalence of Domestic Violence

All sites found that the percentage of cases with domestic violence issues was higher than anticipated once their assessments were in place.

- PTOC leadership in San Diego County anticipated that 6% of the cases would involve domestic violence. Instead, they found the incidence of domestic violence to be much higher, at 32%.
- The Miami-Dade County team quickly learned that the number of custodial parents experiencing domestic or family violence was drastically higher than staff had anticipated. Through the domestic violence eligibility screening process, they experienced a high volume of disclosures of domestic violence. In fact, many of these families presented a high risk of violence and needed immediate response and crisis intervention.
- In Monroe County, findings from PTOC screenings indicated that the incidence of both current and previous experiences of domestic violence is prevalent in the child support population.

Figure 1: Monroe PTOC Cases with Domestic Violence History

Percent of Cases with a History of Violence in the Monroe County PTOC Project



The domestic violence screening tools used by the project sites appeared to be effective in detecting the existence or history of domestic violence. Screening tools from San Diego County, California, and Miami-Dade County, Florida, are provided in Appendix C.

Takeaways from Site Evaluations

All sites were also required to contract for an independent evaluation of PTOC's impact on participating families. Because each site contracted independently for an evaluator, there was wide variance in approach and data analysis across the sites. The evaluations had limited ability to compare program participants with non-participants, and none of the evaluations included a random assignment of parents into treatment or control groups.

All of the evaluations included some descriptive elements, focused on program implementation and parent participation in program services. Most evaluators attempted to describe how program services affected the amount of time the children spent with the noncustodial parent.

Some of the evaluators studied whether PTOC influenced the payment of child support and what impact PTOC had on the relationships between the parents and between the parents and child. Additionally, some sites evaluated how well the PTOC program was received by parents.

Varied Impacts on Children's Time with Noncustodial Parents

In Oregon, most custodial mothers (72%) and most noncustodial fathers (72%) reported an increase in the amount of time the noncustodial parent was scheduled to spend with the child. Parenting time terms in these agreements varied, with one-third calling for no overnights, and 29% calling for nine or more overnights per month.

The San Diego evaluation found a statistically significant difference in the average number of hours per week that PTOC noncustodial parents spent with their children six months after establishing a parenting time order compared to non-PTOC noncustodial parents.

In contrast, the difference between PTOC and non-PTOC families regarding number of overnights spent with the noncustodial parent was not statistically significant for Miami-Dade.

Unclear Impacts on Child Support Payments

In San Diego, PTOC noncustodial parents paid support at a higher rate than the comparison group. One county in Ohio conducted its own analysis of child support payment data and found PTOC participants paying current support and making payments on arrears at a much higher rate than non-participants.

Several sites observed no significant differences in various payment outcomes. In Miami-Dade, no significant difference was observed in the amount of monthly child support paid. In Monroe County, there was no significant difference in the rate of payment. The Oregon evaluation examined whether payment rates varied depending on how parenting time orders were established, finding no differences in payment rates for cases that used mediation to establish a parenting plan versus other establishment methods.

No sites reported a decrease in child support paid. Additionally, evaluators reported difficulty accessing and analyzing child support payment data.

Generally Positive Impacts on Relationships

In their evaluations, all sites generally reported improvements in parent-parent and parent-child relationships. However, each evaluation examined these relationships in different ways.

Of the 57 families who were surveyed in Monroe County, 85% reported being highly engaged (once a week or more visits). Ninety-five percent reported being satisfied with their relationship with their children, while 50% reported being satisfied with the quality of communication with the custodial parent.

In Miami-Dade, 80% of custodial parents surveyed indicated their relationship with the noncustodial parent improved or remained the same following mediation. Custodial parents from PTOC families were also significantly more likely to report improvements in their relationship with their child.

Nearly one-third (31%) of PTOC noncustodial parents in San Diego felt the relationship with their children was "better than before" compared to 13% of noncustodial parents in the comparison group, a difference that was statistically significant. San Diego also found a significantly greater proportion of PTOC custodial parents and noncustodial parents (27% and

26%, respectively) felt their relationship with each other was “excellent/very good” six months after the parenting time order was established. Among the comparison group parents, the percentages were 8% of custodial and 15% of noncustodial parents.

For the Oregon evaluation, 25 noncustodial parents were interviewed. Those who used mediation were more likely to say the relationship between themselves and the custodial parent improved. Those who did not mediate were more likely to say the relationship worsened. However, the differences were not statistically significant.

Positive Response to Services

Based on the site evaluations, parents were generally satisfied with PTOC services and appreciated the offer of parenting time at the same time they were establishing a child support order.

Miami-Dade staff found that both custodial and noncustodial parents reported feeling that the PTOC process was fair and reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. In addition, participants felt the program saved them time and resources.

In San Diego, nine in ten custodial and noncustodial parents felt the services they received were helpful. Ninety-six percent of custodial parents were willing to recommend the program to other parents seeking parenting time orders, as were 89% of noncustodial parents.

Oregon surveyed parents about the mediation process. More than half of the parents surveyed were very satisfied with the mediation process. All parents felt the mediator provided enough information ahead of time so that they were fully prepared for the mediation. Parents also agreed the mediator explained the confidentiality of mediation adequately and spent enough time mediating their parenting time plan. Almost 90% of parents said they “felt heard” during mediation, and just over 90% felt they were treated fairly.

Conclusion

PTOC demonstrated that child support agencies can incorporate parenting time orders into the child support establishment process with appropriate family violence safeguards. Evaluators of the project sites confirmed that parents appreciate the opportunity to address parenting time, even though recruitment was a challenge for PTOC initially. Finally, PTOC appears to help some parents with improved relationships, more time with their children, and some small increases in child support compliance.

San Diego County, California

Department of Child Support Services

The San Diego County PTOC project was designed to create a more customer-friendly approach for parents interested in establishing child support, custody, and parenting time orders, but who may have felt the legal process was too expensive or intimidating to navigate. The project allowed parents to file child support and parenting time orders simultaneously if both parents could reach an agreement. San Diego County uses a judicial process to establish child support orders.

San Diego County Project Partners

The program collaborated with the following key partners for the PTOC pilot project:

- Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA)
- Family Law Facilitator Office
- San Diego Association of Governments, the independent evaluator of the project

Training

The San Diego program partnered with a local domestic violence service agency, the YWCA, a long-established community-based organization with expertise in providing services to victims of domestic violence and their families. The YWCA staff identified an evidence-based danger assessment and conducted domestic violence training for project staff, instructing staff on completing the danger assessment and on making appropriate referrals to community-based organizations.

To ensure that enough staff were trained and able to conduct danger assessments, the YWCA trained three project staff on this task, who in turn trained five additional staff.

Process for Parenting Time Order Establishment

The basic process for San Diego County’s PTOC project is summarized below:

- Both parents were screened at the pre-order stage to determine eligibility for PTOC and to be assessed for any domestic violence history. Parents who answered “yes” to any of the domestic violence screening questions were referred to a domestic violence coordinator for the more in-depth danger assessment.
- After screening, all parents were invited into the office for a case resolution meeting where they watched a video on the child support process. Those who were eligible for PTOC remained to watch a second, five-minute video that explained the benefits of the PTOC program.
- If both parents were present and agreed to participate in PTOC, they attended a case resolution meeting, facilitated by a child support caseworker.
- If one parent was absent, the caseworker would call the parent to discuss the proposed orders or set up a future meeting. Both parents did not need to be present to reach an agreed order.

- Parents were referred to the Family Law Facilitator Office to complete the agreement. If an agreement was reached, the agreement and the child support order were filed with the Court where no filing fee was required. If no agreement was reached, the family law facilitator assisted in filing a motion for a court hearing. Court hearings required a \$400 filing fee, or parents could apply for a waiver if low-income.

Miami-Dade County, Florida

The Miami-Dade PTOC program provided unmarried, separated parents an opportunity to establish parenting time orders through mediation. Eligibility for the program required parents to have at least one child under the age of 14, no domestic violence issues, and no existing child support order in place. The Miami-Dade child support program establishes child support orders by judicial process.

Miami-Dade Project Partners

State and local government agencies, local nonprofits, and private sector organizations were involved in the process of establishing parenting time agreements. The Miami-Dade program collaborated with the following key partners for the PTOC pilot:

- The Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida Administrative Office of the Courts Family Division, its mediation team, and Family Court Services
- Miami-Dade Department of Human Services Coordinated Victim Assistance Center
- Florida Council Against Domestic Violence
- Justice & Security Strategies, Inc., the independent evaluator of the project

Training

Miami-Dade project staff were provided training to manage cases involving family and domestic violence. Domestic violence training was provided to intake, legal, and call center staff in addition to specialized PTOC training. These specific units were selected because they were most often the initial contact for families during intake and screening. The Miami-Dade program also required all staff to participate in an eight-hour training on domestic violence in collaboration with the Florida Council Against Domestic Violence, and the Bureau of Victim Services and Grants Management of the Office of the Florida Attorney General. This training covered a range of topics including the parameters of the grant program, domestic violence issues, and victim assistance programs.

Process for Parenting Time Order Establishment

The PTOC process was designed to move eligible parents smoothly through the process of obtaining parenting time orders and child support agreements through participation in mediation. When a custodial parent requested child support services, an intake specialist assessed whether the parent met PTOC's eligibility criteria, explained the PTOC program in terms of its requirements and benefits, and administered an evidence-based domestic violence screening.

If the potential PTOC client had at least one child under the age of 14, was separated and had never married the other parent, did not have an existing child support order in place, and was not experiencing domestic violence, the parent was invited to participate in the PTOC program. If the custodial parent agreed, a hearing was scheduled.

When parents arrived on their hearing date, they first participated in mediation with a Florida Supreme Court certified mediator with whom they worked to establish a parenting time agreement. Afterward, both parties met with a paralegal specializing in child support who made necessary adjustments to child support amounts based on the number of overnights to be spent with the noncustodial parent. Finally, the parties met with a general magistrate who reviewed the parenting agreement and child support order with both parents. Parents left the courthouse with a child support order and a parenting time order obtained in a single day and in a single location, saving them time and money on transportation, child care, and hours away from work.

Monroe County Prosecutor Child Support Division, Indiana

The Monroe County PTOC program screened new child support cases for domestic violence and assigned the case to one of three paths, described below. The Monroe County child support program establishes child support orders by a judicial process.

Monroe County Project Partners

The program collaborated with the following key partners for the PTOC pilot project:

- Middle Way House
- Indiana University Family and Children Mediation Clinic
- Monroe County Prosecutor's Office
- Indiana Child Support
- EvalSolutions, Inc., the independent evaluator of the project

Training

Monroe County project staff were provided with PTOC training. All staff involved in establishing child support and parenting time orders received domestic violence training. Select staff members who administered the family violence assessment received training focused on administering the assessment tool.

Process for Parenting Time Order Establishment

The Mediator's Assessment of Safety Issues and Concerns screening interview was adapted for the PTOC project to screen custodial and noncustodial parents after a case was created but before the child support petition hearing. The PTOC project manager or Middle Way House legal advocate conducted these individual, private interviews a week prior to the scheduled hearing. Based on the screening results, interviewers recommended one of three legal paths for establishing a parenting time order.

- Path A: No reported current or historical evidence of violence. The interviewer recommended the case proceed through the typical protocol in Court to establish a parenting time order.
- Path B: Reported history of moderate violence. The interviewer recommended the judicial officer order the case to mediation with instructions to complete domestic violence screening and consider appropriate accommodations to the mediation process.
- Path C: Reported current violence or history of heavy violence. The interviewer recommended that the judicial officer order a civil investigation prior to determining parenting time issues.

Referral materials to community services, including intimate partner violence services, were disseminated to all parents participating in the grant.

Ohio 7 County Project, Ohio

The Ohio 7 County project screened new child support cases for domestic violence issues and, where domestic violence concerns did not exist, the program facilitated establishment of a parenting time order at the same time the child support order was established. The seven counties participating in the project primarily used standard parenting time orders that were adopted by the county courts. Several counties also received approval from their courts to offer modified versions of the standard court orders for situations where parents' work schedules or other family circumstances warranted variations from the standard schedule. The Ohio child support program establishes child support orders by a quasi-administrative process.

Ohio 7 County Project Partners

The Fairfield County child support enforcement agency served as the grant recipient and provided project management and grant oversight as well as leadership for the coalition of seven county child support agencies and additional agencies and stakeholders, including:

- Ohio's State AV administrator
- Ohio Commission on Fatherhood
- Ohio Practitioners' Network for Fathers and Families
- Child Advocacy Center of Fairfield County
- Ohio Domestic Violence Network
- Ohio University, the independent evaluator of the project

Training

In the seven Ohio counties, project staff were provided initial training on PTOC processes by the PTOC project director (based in Fairfield County). Additionally, all staff involved in delivering parenting time services in the participating counties attended a seven-hour domestic violence training led by OCSE, the Child Advocacy Center of Fairfield County, and the Ohio Domestic Violence Network.

Process for Parenting Time Order Establishment

The Ohio 7 County project identified eligible cases with the following criteria:

- New child support case where parentage had been established
- Parents never married
- No prior parenting time orders
- No past or present domestic violence or restraining orders

Where appropriate, an administrative child support hearing officer facilitated a dialogue between the parents to determine if they could agree to the terms of a parenting time order. If the parents agreed, they signed the parenting time agreement at the same time that the administrative order of support was established. Both the support order and parenting time agreement were provided to the court for adoption.

Oregon Department of Justice, Division of Child Support

Oregon used two approaches to extend the opportunity to create a parenting time plan to parents in the child support system. One approach was the creation of a network of mediators who would provide never-married, low-income parents the chance to mediate an agreement. The project was housed with Oregon's child support system. The second approach was the introduction of an interactive web-based program that parents could use to generate a parenting plan, known as the Interactive Parenting Plan (IPP).

The Oregon Division of Child Support (DCS) handles child support establishment and enforcement for current and former TANF and Medicaid cases. DCS establishes administrative orders in an agency setting, and orders are promulgated by administrative law judges.

Oregon Project Partners

The program collaborated with the following key partners for the PTOC pilot project:

- Contracted mediators
- Oregon Department of Human Services
- Oregon Department of Justice
- Center for Policy Research, the independent evaluator of the project

Training

Through the PTOC grant, mediators received training on domestic violence. The Oregon Department of Human Services provided an eight-hour course for mediators and public-sector employees. The course covered types of abuse, warning signs of abusive behaviors, ways to support survivors, and services available through community providers. In addition, PTOC project mediators were required to administer the *Domestic Violence Screen for Mediators Questionnaire*, an evidence-based, 20-item screening tool developed by Oregon's Family Violence Coordinating Counsel.

PTOC managers also provided procedural training to case managers via a webinar. This training focused on how case managers should note on the computerized child support system key tracking items for the project, such as parental interest in parenting time, the process of referring parents to a mediator, and the production of a parenting plan either through mediation or by the parents on their own.

Process for Parenting Time Order Establishment

The PTOC mediation program was designed to help establish safe parenting time plans by having Oregon child support case managers routinely ask noncustodial parents about parenting time arrangements when establishing child support orders. Caseworkers gave parents who expressed an interest in parenting time the name and phone number of a mediator in their geographic area who would provide mediation services to interested parents at no cost to families.

In addition to mediators, case managers could refer parents to Oregon's online parenting plan tool, the IPP. Oregon developed the IPP using an "off-the-shelf" software program that would allow parents to develop parenting plans interactively. The online program was envisioned as an

interview format in which parents would respond to questions and their parenting plan would be constructed as they progressed. The program asks parents for information and, based on their responses, provided additional information to help them with decision-making. It also routed them to specialized portions of the survey that were unique to their situation. Ultimately, the program built a plan based on parent responses.

It was the parent's responsibility to contact the mediator within 10 business days for the child support order establishment process to be suspended while mediation was conducted. If the parent took the next step and called the mediator, the mediator would ask for information from the other parent to determine their willingness to mediate.

After parents were contacted, the mediator notified the child support office that mediation was planned, and the child support caseworker would suspend further action on establishing a child support order for 30 days to allow parents to mediate their parenting plan. Additional time allowances were made for those who needed it.

If the mediation resulted in a parenting plan, the parent sent a copy of the formal parenting plan to the DCS for statistical and evaluation purposes. No PTOC grant resources were available to assist families in filing a plan with the court. Thus, it was the parent's responsibility to file the order with the court for its formal promulgation as an enforceable order, or forego a court filing and keep the parenting time agreement as a "psychological" agreement between the parties with no formal legal standing.

Regardless of the formal legal status of the parenting plan, the child support agency used the number of overnights called for in the plan to establish the parenting time credit in the Oregon child support guideline.