

Family Law Basics

A Plain-Language Guide to Everyday Family Issues

Family law governs the legal relationships between family members. These cases are often emotionally challenging, making it especially important to understand the core legal concepts involved.

1. Child Support

Child support is a court-ordered financial contribution from one parent to the other for the care and upbringing of their child. The goal is to ensure that the child's needs are met, regardless of the parents' living situation.

Key Concept	Simple Explanation
Calculation	The amount of support is typically determined by a statutory guideline formula . This formula primarily considers the income of both parents, the number of children, and the amount of time each parent spends with the children.
Purpose	The funds are intended to cover the child's basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical care.
Modification	Child support orders are not permanent. They can be modified (changed) if there is a substantial change in circumstances , such as a significant change in a parent's income or the child's needs.

2. Custody

Custody refers to the legal and physical care of a child. Courts make decisions based on the “**best interests of the child**” standard, which is the guiding principle in all custody matters.

Type of Custody	What It Means
Legal Custody	The right and responsibility to make major decisions about the child's life, including education, medical care, and religious upbringing. This is often shared (Joint Legal Custody).
Physical Custody	Where the child lives on a day-to-day basis. This can be Sole Physical Custody (one parent is the primary residence) or Joint Physical Custody (the child spends significant time with both parents).

3. Visitation (Parenting Time)

Visitation, now often referred to as **Parenting Time**, is the schedule that outlines when the non-custodial parent (or the parent with less physical custody) spends time with the child.

- **Standard Schedules:** Many states have standard visitation schedules (e.g., every other weekend, alternating holidays) that courts use as a starting point.
- **Flexibility:** Parents are encouraged to create a schedule that works best for their unique family situation, provided it serves the child's best interests.
- **Supervised Visitation:** In cases where the child's safety is a concern, the court may order **supervised visitation**, meaning the parent's time with the child must be monitored by another adult or agency.

Important Notice:

The information provided in this guide is for educational purposes only. We do not provide legal advice, legal interpretation, or attorney services, and we cannot represent anyone in court. Our goal is to help you learn, understand, and feel confident when navigating legal topics.
