



## **Oregon's New Tool for Parents in the Child Support System: The Interactive Parenting Plan**

Oregon's Interactive Parenting Plan (IPP) is the first comprehensive, interactive tool created to generate customized parenting plans. It is the result of a joint effort of many stakeholders, including representatives of the court, the child support program, the private bar, mediators, community organizations serving families with safety issues, and experts in the field of child development. The process began nearly 20 years ago with the creation of a downloadable PDF parenting plan. The 2012 Parenting Time Opportunities for Children (PTOC) grant by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) advanced the process of converting the downloadable plans to an interactive format. PTOC grants were intended to increase safe opportunities for children in the child support system to build relationships with both parents by creating formal parenting time arrangements when child support orders are established. In 2015, with support from the PTOC grant in Oregon, a dedicated staff member was assigned to the project to develop the questions to which parents would respond to permit construction of their parenting plan. Oregon decided to use the Odyssey Guide & File software program created by Tyler Technologies to build a plan based on parental responses. (<https://www.tylertech.com/solutions-products/odyssey-product-suite/guide-file>).

Testing for the IPP began in December 2016, and the IPP website went live on February 21, 2017. The Center for Policy Research (CPR) of Denver, Colorado, conducted an evaluation of Oregon's PTOC grant, which included an assessment of the process of implementing the IPP and early reactions to it by architects, stakeholders, and parents (<http://centerforpolicyresearch.org/publications/an-evaluation-of-the-oregon-parenting-time-opportunities-for-children-grant-1-mediation-2-interactive-parenting-plans/>).

### **Content of the IPP**

The IPP introductory screen explains the contents of the site and how to navigate in it. Parents are given links to sites that will provide additional information "about courts, parenting plans, legal forms, and other services in the community." Parents can also obtain more information about mediation, financial considerations, and child development.

Before beginning to create their parenting plan, parents are given information about the issue of abuse and domestic violence. Interested parents are given the option of viewing some questions to help them decide if they would like to develop a Safety Focused Parenting Plan. It includes provisions dealing with supervised visitation, safety

rules during parenting time, how the children will be exchanged, and communication about the exchange of the children.

Parents who do not require heightened attention to safety complete the Basic Parenting Time Plan. They start by entering information about the age(s) of the child or children for whom a plan will be developed and information about where the child lives (e.g., primarily with one parent or a 50/50 split between the parents). The site includes options for parents who live medium and long distances from one another and sample plans for children of various ages.

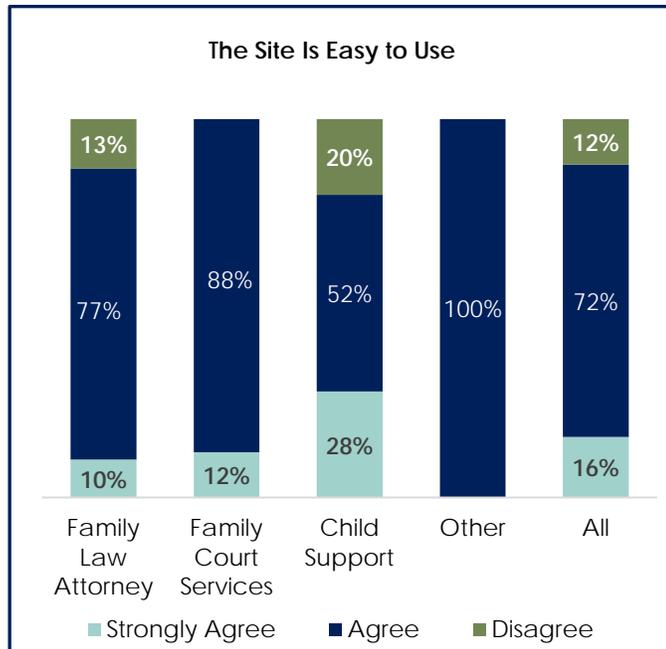
Parents work through screens that specify how contact will occur during the school year, such as weekend or weeknight time with each parent. They can also develop plans that cover school breaks, summer vacations, holidays, and unanticipated school closures.

### **Reactions to the IPP**

Because the IPP is new, it is impossible to fully assess its functionality and popularity at this time. Between February and mid-June 2017, a total of 389 parenting time plans were completed using the IPP website; 311 (80%) were basic plans and 78 (20%) were safety-focused plans that included a variety of protective features. Although information is not available regarding the number of parents who may have started a plan but did not complete it, the number of completed plans filed with the court, and the number of plans filed by unmarried parents in the child support system, child support staff believe that the IPP is having an impact. As one staff member observed:

Personally, I think the IPP is a marvelous tool and I believe the early impact on the child support population is the ability to complete a flexible plan and have at-their-fingertips resources and information, and it gives Child Support Program staff something to refer customers to (presuming that staff is informed).

The results of surveys with 34 family law attorneys, 32 child support workers, 20 family court service workers, 3 mediators, and 5 other types of workers tend to confirm that observation. A majority of the respondents from each professional group feel that the site provides the “right amount” of information and that the information is useful. Child support workers were least apt to characterize the site as “easy to use.”



Forty parents recruited in child support offices (24 mothers and 16 fathers) tested the IPP site and responded to a paper-and-pencil survey about their online experiences. Both mothers and fathers rated the site highly (9.1 and 8.8 out of 10, respectively). However, fathers were somewhat less likely than mothers to characterize the information and resources provided as helpful and easy to understand. Overall, mothers reported being more comfortable using a computer and exploring links than did fathers.

### Lessons from the IPP

Architects of the Oregon IPP offered the following recommendations to other states interested in future replications.

1. Know that it is more difficult, and more time consuming, to create and launch an IPP than you might anticipate.
2. A successful IPP development process requires high-level support from the court and from the child support community.
3. Involve all relevant stakeholders, including the private bar, domestic violence advocates, the courts, and child support professionals.
4. Clarify the role of stakeholders; they should advise but not dictate website content.
5. Keep in mind the 80/20 rule. The site must be designed to meet the needs of 80% of those who will use it. The court will provide assistance to the 20% who need more or different forms of help.
6. The IPP is a parenting plan tool, not a class. Details about child development and other relevant resources should be provided through links to other websites; those details should not be embedded in the parenting plan. Do not recommend

what parents should do. The site should be a tool that parents can use to create a parenting plan they believe will be best for them.

7. Stay with the big picture. Subject-matter experts may want to be exhaustive, but a useful tool is one that can be completed. Do not feel obliged to use everything the subject-matter experts suggest.
8. The length of time the parent spends on the plan should not be a critical consideration. Parents who have thought about what they want in a plan will move faster than parents who are just beginning to consider the issues. There will be literacy constraints that will mean even the simplest site will take some parents longer than others.
9. Using off-the-shelf software can reduce the delays that come with being reliant on state programmers to create, revise, and launch the product.
10. The IPP should be widely publicized to the general public and relevant professional groups to attract users. Visitors to the state's child support website and its guideline calculator should be able to follow a link to the IPP, and the IPP should provide a link to the child support calculator.

The IPP offers one way to help parents in the child support system obtain visitation with their children without pursuing a legally distinct proceeding for which they typically lack resources. It also promises to be a way for child support agencies to help parents establish safe parenting time arrangements at the same time as their child support order, which is both an “important goal” articulated by Congress (Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014. H.R. 4980), and an unallowable activity for child support funding. Additional research is needed to determine whether the IPP achieves these goals. More to the point, we need to know whether and how parents in the child support system learn about the IPP and use it; the extent to which it is used by one or both parents separately or together; whether the plans that they develop are kept as informal agreements or become legally enforceable orders; whether the IPP adequately addresses the issue of safety; whether parents need additional forms of help, such as telephone hotlines and virtual legal and mediation clinics; and whether the IPP leads to more understandable and satisfactory access arrangements for both parents.

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