2-2-3 or week on, week off: choosing by your child's age

Younger children usually cope better with shorter gaps away from each parent, which a 2-2-3 rotation gives; older children and teenagers often prefer fewer moves, which week on, week off gives. The research does not settle which is better. How well the parents cooperate, and how the child is coping, matter more than the pattern itself.

Key points

- A 2-2-3 rotation means more handovers but shorter gaps; week on, week off means fewer handovers but a week apart.
- Young children often find a week without a parent long; teenagers often find frequent moves tiring.
- The evidence on shared time is mixed: studies are hard to compare, and families who share time tend to have lower conflict to begin with.
- Parents' cooperation, and keeping the child out of the middle, matters more than which pattern you pick.
- Review the schedule as your child grows, and give older children a real say.

2-2-3 and week on, week off, compared by age

Age	2-2-3	Week on, week off	Things to weigh
0–1	Shorter gaps suit a baby's sense of time, but many handovers can disrupt feeding and sleep	A week apart is long for a baby	Many families with babies use other patterns, with frequent shorter time rather than overnights at first
2–4	Short gaps help a toddler feel neither parent has vanished	A week can feel very long; some toddlers struggle at each switch	Matching routines and a comfort object in both homes; how the child copes after a handover
5–7	Works well if both homes are near school and routines match	Can work if the child can manage a week, perhaps with a mid-week visit or call	School runs, homework and kit moving between homes
8–12	Frequent moves can feel tiring and disorganised	Often easier to settle into each home for a week	Friendships, clubs and the child's own view
13–17	Many teenagers dislike the number of moves	Often preferred: fewer moves, longer stretches	Give real weight to their view; flexibility around school, work and friends

When two parents share time roughly equally, two schedules come up again and again. In a 2-2-3 rotation, the child spends two days with one parent, two with the other, then three with the first, and the pattern flips the following week. In week on, week off, the child lives a full week in each home. Both give each parent about half the time. They feel very different to a child.

What changes with age

A child's sense of time grows with them. For a baby or toddler, a week is a very long time, and a parent who is gone for seven days can feel gone. Joan Kelly and Michael Lamb's review of child development research describes how infants and toddlers form close bonds with both parents and how those bonds are kept up through regular, frequent contact in everyday routines such as feeding, bathing and bedtime. That is the main argument for shorter gaps when children are young.

The trade-off is handovers. A 2-2-3 rotation can mean several switches a week, and each one is a change of home, routine and parent. Older children and teenagers, who have school, friends, clubs and a growing life of their own, often find frequent moves tiring and prefer longer stretches in each home.

What the research says, and does not

It is worth being honest: the research does not settle which schedule is better. Anja Steinbach's review of forty studies from North America, Australia and Europe found evidence that shared arrangements can be good for children's and parents' well-being, but also that the studies were very different from each other and that families who share time equally tend to be better off, better educated and lower in conflict to begin with. Her conclusion was that the risks and benefits are not yet clear.

A large Swedish study of sixth- and ninth-graders, titled "Fifty moves a year", tested the worry that frequent moves harm children. Children who lived equally in both homes reported fewer stress-related physical complaints, such as headaches and stomach aches, than children living mostly or only with one parent, though more than children in families where the parents were together. Moving often did not, on average, mean worse.

Almost none of this research compares 2-2-3 with week on, week off directly. What it does show, again and again, is that the relationship between the parents matters. A study of teenagers in separated families found that those living in two homes were especially likely to feel caught in the middle when parents were in high conflict, and especially unlikely to when parents cooperated; feeling caught was linked to poorer adjustment.

How to choose

Start from your child, not from the calendar. How do they cope at handovers? How long can they comfortably go without seeing each parent? How far apart are the homes, and how far is each from school? For a young child, shorter gaps often help; for a teenager, their own view should carry real weight.

Then look at the adults. A pattern with many handovers needs parents who can be civil at the door and keep routines similar. If handovers are tense, fewer of them, or handovers at school or nursery, may protect your child more than the ideal split.

Keep reviewing it. The AAP notes that a routine weekly or monthly schedule may be comforting to children, and that parents living apart should agree consistent rules for both homes. What works at three rarely works at thirteen.

When to get help

Talk to your child's doctor if your child's distress around the schedule is lasting or getting worse. If you and the other parent cannot agree, a family mediator can help; where arrangements are decided by a court, ask a family lawyer or legal advice service about your own situation. If anyone is in danger, contact your local emergency services.

If you live in two homes

Whatever pattern you choose, write it down and share it, so your child can see the plan for the week. Keep the big routines, bedtime, homework time, screen rules, as close as you can between the two homes; the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests agreeing a consistent set of rules for both households. Review the arrangement together as your child grows, and if you cannot agree, a mediator can help you find a plan.

Sources

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emoglow.ai/guides/two-homes/2-2-3-or-week-on-week-off/
By Bhumika Mishra · Sources checkedNovember 9, 2026
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