

2026 Christmas parenting arrangements: A guide for separated parents

Author: Elise Tabensky
Email: elise@emerafamilylaw.com.au
Date: **Monday September 7, 2026**

Planning Christmas as a separated parent? Early planning, respectful communication and a clear schedule can make the holidays smoother for your children. Our 2026 guide covers holiday schedules, travel, changeovers and the 13 November court deadline.

Christmas is a special time for children, filled with family gatherings and celebrations. For separated parents, however, navigating parenting arrangements during the holiday period can sometimes be challenging. The key to a smoother festive season is to plan early, communicate respectfully and keep the children's best interests at the centre of every decision.

Whether you already have parenting orders or are working towards an agreement, preparing for the 2026 Christmas and summer school holidays now can help reduce uncertainty and avoid unnecessary disputes. Note that applications for parenting orders over the holiday period must generally be filed by 13 November 2026 (see the court deadline section below).

Establish a clear and practical Christmas and school holiday schedule

A clear schedule helps both parents understand their responsibilities over the holiday season and gives children certainty about what to expect.

When negotiating Christmas and summer holiday arrangements, consider:

- The start and end dates of the school holidays. These differ from school to school as some will plan student free days at the end or start of term.

- Where the children will stay and when they will spend time with each parent;
- Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Year's celebrations;
- Any other holiday celebrations;
- Handover times, locations and transport responsibilities;
- Extended family plans, familial and cultural traditions and other important events; and
- Interstate or overseas travel plans, including any required consent.

Some families alternate Christmas Day each year, while others divide the day between households or celebrate on separate dates.

There is no single arrangement suitable for every family. The most appropriate schedule will depend on the children's ages, routines, travel distances, relationships and individual needs.

Review your existing parenting order or parenting plan

Before proposing any new arrangements, carefully review any existing parenting orders or parenting plan.

Parenting orders made by a Court are legally binding and usually contain specific provisions dealing with Christmas, school holidays, changeovers and travel. These provisions can operate differently from the usual term-time routine, so do not assume the regular schedule automatically applies.

A parenting plan is a written agreement that records parenting arrangements agreed between parents. While it can provide a helpful framework for cooperation, it is not legally enforceable in the same way as parenting orders.

If the current arrangements are unclear, outdated or unsuitable for the upcoming holidays, consider seeking legal advice about your options.

Communicate respectfully and do not involve children in conflict

Christmas time can bring on strong emotions, particularly when parents are adjusting to new family traditions. Clear and respectful communication can help prevent misunderstandings from escalating into disputes.

Discuss proposed arrangements directly with the other parent, or where communication is difficult, via a parenting app, provide reasonable notice and confirm important arrangements in writing.

Avoid asking children to deliver messages, negotiate arrangements or choose between parents. Children should not feel responsible for managing adult decisions and disagreements.

Plan travel and changeovers in advance

Summer holidays often involve family visits, road trips and overseas travel. These plans should be discussed well in advance, particularly where they affect the other parent's scheduled time.

Make sure to provide the other parent with relevant information about travel dates, accommodation, transport, contact details and expected return times. Check your parenting orders for any notice, consent or travel requirements, and address passport arrangements early if overseas travel is proposed.

Do not assume that consent is unnecessary or that a parent can unilaterally change arrangements. Restrictions concerning overseas travel can have serious legal consequences, particularly where existing orders apply.

It is also worth agreeing on practical changeover details for the commencement of and return from travel, including who will collect the children, where handovers will occur, how delays or unexpected disruptions will be handled and if "make up" time is appropriate.

Court deadline for Christmas parenting orders: 13 November 2026

Under rule 5.03 of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (Family Law) Rules 2021, applications for parenting orders relating to the end-of-year school holiday period must generally be filed before the second Friday of November. This year the deadline falls at 4.00pm on Friday, 13 November 2026.

Applications filed after this time may not be heard before Christmas unless the Court considers the matter urgent.

This does not prevent you and the other parent from agreeing about how the holiday period will be shared. However, it is important to be aware of the Court deadline, and note that if agreement is not formalised in a court order, it may not be legally enforceable.

Need help with Christmas parenting arrangements? Get legal advice early

If you have concerns or are unsure about your Christmas parenting arrangements, our experienced family lawyers can walk you through your options and help work towards a practical outcome that prioritises your children's best interests for a memorable Christmas season.

Christmas arrangements are easier to sort out early. Contact Emera Family Law in Melbourne or Sunshine to talk through your options before the 13 November court deadline.

This blog is of a general nature and should not be relied upon as legal advice. If you require further information, advice or assistance for your specific circumstances, please contact us.