THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Deciding Who Decides

Co-Parenting & Communication · Inside-Out Co-Parenting

A simple way for a parent inside and a caregiver outside to divide decisions before conflict starts.

IN THIS GUIDE

- The daily lane
- The shared lane
- The parent-reserved lane
- When a decision doesn't sort cleanly
- Try it: a real example
- Scripts you can use
- Your checklist

A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

Deciding Who Decides

> *A simple way for a parent inside and a caregiver outside to divide decisions before conflict starts.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

A lot of co-parenting friction is really a lane problem: two adults each reaching for the wheel on a decision that should have clearly belonged to one of them. Without an agreed map of who decides what, every decision becomes a negotiation, and every negotiation is a chance for old resentments to resurface.

Decision lanes are not about ranking who matters more as a parent. They are about matching authority to who has the standing, the information, and often the legal footing to make a given call well. A caregiver enrolling a child in school needs to be able to act without waiting on a call that may not come for days. An inside parent whose input is required for a major medical decision needs that input actually sought, not assumed away because it's inconvenient to reach them.

This lesson lays out a practical way to sort decisions into lanes — daily, shared, and parent-reserved — and to handle the decisions that do not sort cleanly, which is most of the interesting ones.

THE DAILY LANE

Daily-lane decisions are the ones that need to be made in real time by whoever is present: bedtime, meals, homework enforcement, day-to-day discipline, which friend's house is okay to visit this weekend. These require context an inside parent usually doesn't have and would slow to a crawl if every one needed a phone call.

The daily lane belongs to the caregiver by default, full stop, regardless of how the inside parent might have handled it. This is less about legal authority and more about function — someone has to be able to act today, and that someone is whoever's actually there.

THE SHARED LANE

Shared-lane decisions affect the child's larger trajectory but aren't urgent enough to require single-handed action: a change in extracurriculars, a shift in screen-time policy going into a new school year, how a difficult family topic gets explained to the child. These benefit from both adults weighing in, even if the caregiver ultimately has to act on a timeline the parent can't match.

The practical version of shared-lane decision-making is not a vote with equal weight every time. It is the

caregiver saying, in advance if possible, 'here's what I'm thinking and why — tell me if you see it differently before I act,' and giving the parent a real window to respond rather than a token one.

+ THE PARENT-RESERVED LANE

Some decisions are genuinely reserved for the parent, either because the law says so in your state or custody arrangement, or because the family has agreed they should be: major medical procedures, school enrollment or changes in some jurisdictions, decisions about the child's relationship with the parent's own family, and consent to significant life events.

What counts as legally reserved to a parent — versus what a caregiver can authorize on their own — varies by state, by whether custody has been formally addressed, and by whatever documentation the caregiver holds, such as a caregiver authorization affidavit or power of attorney. This is not something MFGP can tell you the answer to for your situation; a family law attorney, legal aid office, or your state's child welfare agency can tell you what applies where you live.

Where a decision is parent-reserved but the parent cannot be reached quickly, families do better when they've agreed in advance on a default — for example, in a true medical emergency, the caregiver acts first and informs the parent as soon as possible, rather than the household being stuck without a plan in a crisis.

+ WHEN A DECISION DOESN'T SORT CLEANLY

Plenty of real decisions straddle two lanes — a discipline issue that started as daily but escalated into something with long-term consequences, a school problem that began as academic and became a placement question. When that happens, name it out loud: 'this started small but I think it's actually a shared-lane decision now — can we talk it through.'

Disagreements about which lane a decision belongs in are themselves worth having as a private, adult conversation, separate from the decision itself. Getting the lane right prevents the same argument from recurring every time a similar decision comes up.

+ THE EXTRACURRICULAR THAT BECAME A FIGHT ABOUT EVERYTHING

A mother incarcerated for the past year found out, on a call, that her son had quit baseball and joined a different after-school program without her hearing about it beforehand. She felt like a decision about her son's life had been made without her, and the fight that followed brought up months of accumulated frustration about being left out.

The caregiver, her sister, felt blindsided by the intensity — to her, it had been a scheduling decision, made because baseball conflicted with a tutoring slot the boy needed. She hadn't thought of it as something that required advance discussion.

Once they cooled down, they agreed this was a shared-lane decision — not urgent enough to require the caregiver's unilateral call, but also not a daily-lane decision like what's for dinner. Going forward, the aunt agreed to give the mother a heads-up before changes like this, even a short one, with enough lead time to weigh in if she wanted to.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Naming a decision's lane before acting

Caregiver to inside parent, in advance of a shared-lane decision.

"I'm thinking about switching him from baseball to the after-school tutoring program because of the scheduling conflict. I want to hear if you see it differently before I make the change — can you call or write back by [date]?"

Asking which lane a decision belongs in

"I want to make sure I'm not stepping on something that's actually yours to decide. Is this the kind of thing you'd want input on going forward, or is it okay for me to just handle it?"

Raising a legally reserved decision

When a major decision needs the parent's actual consent or input.

"This is a decision I don't think I can or should make without you — it's about [medical procedure / school placement / etc.]. Can we figure out how to get your input or consent on record, given the time we have?"

Setting a default for emergencies in advance

"If something happens where I can't reach you in time and it's urgent, I'm going to act on it and call you as soon as I possibly can afterward. I want you to know that's the plan, not a decision to leave you out."

+ MAP YOUR DECISION LANES

- [ ] List the daily decisions that clearly belong to whoever is running the household.
- [ ] List the shared decisions that benefit from both adults weighing in.
- [ ] Find out what is legally parent-reserved where you live, from a legal aid office or family law attorney.
- [ ] Agree on an emergency default for reserved decisions when the parent can't be reached in time.
- [ ] Practice naming a decision's lane out loud before a disagreement escalates.
- [ ] Give real lead time on shared-lane decisions, not a token heads-up.
- [ ] Keep any documentation — caregiver authorization, power of attorney — current and accessible.
- [ ] Revisit the map as the child gets older and the decisions change.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

What is one recent decision that caused friction because the lane wasn't clear?

Which lane do I tend to overstep, and which do I tend to under-claim?

Do I actually know what's legally reserved to the parent in our state or custody situation?

What emergency default have we agreed on, if any, for a reserved decision made under time pressure?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

List five recurring decisions and mark which lane each belongs in.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.

This is general information and practice guidance — not legal advice, mental-health treatment, or a statement of any court, agency, or facility's rules. Policies differ by state, county, facility, school, and program, so always confirm details with the office involved.

For decisions with legal, medical, financial, or clinical consequences, work with a licensed professional or the organizations listed with each resource.

You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
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