

Negotiating the costs of extra-curricular activities after separation

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Tension between separated parents can often arise when they start to consider who pays for what when it comes to raising their children. One common area of confusion is whether child support covers the costs of extra-curricular activities such as sports, music lessons, school camps, or dance classes and, if not, what other options there are for payment of these activities.

This article explores the following:

A basic overview of child support in Australia;

Child support for extra-curricular activities;

Other options for separated parents to negotiate arrangements for extra-curricular activities.

What is child support in Australia?

Child support is payments or payment arrangements between separated parents to help with the cost of raising a child or children. In Australia, Services Australia (Child Support) manages the child support system under the Child Support (Assessment) Act 1989.

There are two types of child support:

Child support assessment

Services Australia undertakes an assessment using a formula designed to cover everyday costs of raising a child, including:

each parent's income;

the amount of time the child spends with each parent; and

the number and age of the children.

This formula is designed to cover the everyday costs of raising a child, including:

food;

clothing;

housing;

public schooling; and

health care.

Services Australia will advise both parties of the assessment and manage the payments from one party to the other.

If childcare arrangements or personal circumstances change (e.g. the paying parent loses their job, a child is no longer living with the receiving parent), the child support assessment can be reviewed. This may result in an increase or decrease in payments.

Self-managed child support

If you choose to self-manage child support obligations, both parents will come to an agreement on the following:

How much the child support payments will be;

When the payments be made (frequency); and

How the payments will be made.

Are extra-curricular activities included in child support payments?

One of the most frequently asked questions is: Does child support cover extra-curricular activities?

Extra-curricular activities are usually considered non-essential expenses, even though they play an important role in a child's development and social life. So, they will **not** usually be included in a child support assessment by Services Australia.

This means unless parents make a separate arrangement (self-managed child support), the parent receiving child support is not automatically entitled to use those payments for activities such as:

sporting activities;

music, art, or dance lessons;

private academic tutoring;

Community groups like Scouts or Guides, etc.

Other options for separated parents to handle extra-curricular activity costs

Managing extra-curricular activity costs can be challenging for separated parents. However, there are several options available.

Child Support Agreements, including extra costs

Parents may enter into a Binding Child Support Agreement or a Limited Child Support Agreement specifically which includes provision for extra costs of their child or children.

These agreements can define:

extra payments for specific activities (what's covered and how much the payment will be);

reimbursement conditions;

payment due dates.

You can read more about these in our earlier blog, "The difference between a Binding Child Support Agreement and a Limited Child Support Agreement".

Parenting plans or Family Court consent orders

Parents may include extra-curricular activity costs in a parenting plan or obtain consent orders through the Family Court. The primary difference between these two options is parenting plans are not legally enforceable, whereas parenting orders are legally enforceable.

These documents can outline things like:

which activities are covered;

which parent pays for which activity;

how decisions about enrolment in activities are made;

transportation arrangements for activities, etc.

Mutual agreement between parents

Parents can reach a mutual agreement (verbal or written) to share the costs of their child's extra-curricular activities. This might include:

splitting costs 50/50;

assigning certain activities to each parent (e.g. one pays for piano, the other for soccer);

alternating who pays by term or season.

It is highly recommended to obtain advice before entering into any child support agreement or parenting plan, or before seeking parenting orders.

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What if separated parents disagree on extra-curricular activity spending?

Disagreements are common when:

one parent wants the child to join an activity, but the other refuses to pay;

a parent enrols the child without discussing it with the other parent.

In such cases:

the paying parent is not legally obligated to contribute unless a written agreement or court order exists; and

the receiving parent may pay out-of-pocket expenses but cannot demand reimbursement without a prior arrangement.

If parents are unable to work through any disagreement, they may have to consider:

- Family Dispute Resolution (FDR);

another form of alternative dispute resolution;

applying to the court for financial or parenting consent orders.

Tips for separated parents to manage extra-curricular activity expenses

To avoid conflict and support your child's involvement in enriching activities, consider the following tips:

Communicate early and often about interests and upcoming commitments;

Put agreements in writing, even if informal (e.g. emails or text messages);

Remain flexible and adjust contributions based on financial circumstances;

Use mediation or professional support when needed.

Key takeaways

In summary, child support does not automatically cover extra-curricular activities like sports, music lessons, or tutoring. These are considered additional expenses and need to be agreed upon by both parents through mutual agreement, parenting plans, or formal child support agreements.

Being proactive, communicating clearly, and seeking professional advice, when necessary, can help separated parents navigate decisions around extra-curricular activities.

Get help from a family lawyer

If you're unsure about your rights or obligations, or you need help negotiating or documenting parenting arrangements, including child support arrangements, our team of experienced family lawyers can assist.

The information contained in this article is of general nature and should not be construed as legal advice. If you require further information, advice or assistance for your specific circumstances, please contact us.