

- ✓ Understand what your child is going through
- ✓ Help your child talk about their feelings
- ✓ Help them adjust to a new family life



How to deal with **separation and divorce**

AT A GLANCE



Positive things for parents to do when splitting up

- Do ask for help early – families, friends and professionals can help you and your children to manage the difficult task of family change.
- Do sort out details of contact, residency and finance calmly so that it is less painful for the children.
- Do be honest with children about what is happening and what is going to happen.
- Do allow children opportunities to talk about how they feel and be aware that mood and behaviour changes may be their reaction to the situation.
- Do try to keep your children's school, interests, and friendships as stable as possible.
- Do encourage and help your children to be in frequent contact with their other parent through face-to-face contact or by phone, post, email or text.
- Do allow time for everyone involved to adjust.
- Do reassure your children that it is not their fault and they are loved by both their parents.
- Do listen to your children even if the things they say are negative, it is important that they feel heard. Seek support for yourself if you find it hard to hear the things they say.

Did you know?

Children who are supported by caring parents adjust better to a new family life.

Getting used to divorce, separation and a new family

Divorce and separation can be very painful and distressing. But if you have recently separated from your partner, or your children are trying to adjust to a new family, you're not alone. Family change is all around – more than one in four children in Britain will see their parents separate or divorce before they reach the age of 16.

If you are facing family change, you may be going through a range of feelings such as sadness, anger, fear of being alone, or relief. But whatever your feelings, it is really important to put your children's needs first and avoid them being caught up in conflicts and arguments. Don't lean on your children and expect them to be confidants, allies or friends.

One of the strongest emotions that parents can experience is loss. This can be about loss of a shared future, a family life in the same home, or a loss of the familiar and secure. Whatever the reason it can be an overwhelming feeling for you and your children. All loss needs to be mourned, and you and your children need to do just that so the family can move forward.

To help you give your children the support they need, this booklet offers advice on how you can:

- listen to your children and have a better understanding of how they feel
- deal with problems by being honest with them, not taking sides or ignoring them
- help your child adjust to a new stepparent, stepbrother or stepsister
- claim benefits for yourself and your children.

Putting children first

Children may show their distress in all sorts of ways:

- Reactions like losing their temper, becoming moody, shouting, fighting, bullying, stealing, self-harming, substance misuse, and missing school are not unusual. Talking about the difficulties, giving them time and attention or praising them can all help.
- Children often blame themselves for family break up, thinking that what they did or said was the reason a parent left. Make time to reassure your children that it was not their fault.
- Sometimes children will focus all their anger on one or other parent, a brother or sister, or stepparent and blame them for the break up. Other adults around the family can help you and the children at this time – look to grandparents and other relatives and family friends.

At these times, children may want to talk to someone outside their circle of family and friends – a helpline or youth worker. This is a mature step to take, so let them know that you understand they cannot always tell you how they feel.

Remember...

...whatever your own feelings, it is really important to put your children's needs first. Don't let them get caught up in conflicts and arguments.

Helping your child talk about their feelings

It is not always easy to get your child to speak about what they are feeling. But if your child bottles up their feelings, they may get angry or have mood swings. They can find it difficult to tell you that they're upset or missing the other parent. Be patient and loving: it may take time for them to talk. Your child may want something that's not possible, like you getting back together with your ex-partner. It's important that you explain to them why this can't happen.

Remember...

...it's easier to help your child cope with being part of a separated family if you understand how they feel and what they need.

Parentline Plus tips on talking to and listening to children

- Try to see things from your child's point of view – sometimes when you've done this it becomes easier to understand their behaviour and point the way to dealing with it.
- Give your child opportunities to tell you about their feelings, even if these are not easy to hear.
- Get help and support for yourself if your child is telling you difficult and upsetting things.
- Try to be honest and straightforward with your child – don't make promises you can't keep, or threats you won't carry out.
- Ask your child about their point of view on key decisions. They'll value being listened to.
- If you can't do something their way, explain clearly why. It will help them understand.



Relatives matter

Your child needs to know that, even though their parents are separating, there are other relatives and loved ones that are still there for them.

Many children want to see their grandparents and other relatives after a split and when it is safe to do so. It helps them feel that there's still some part of their old family life there. It also helps them to feel more secure.

Negotiating with your ex-partner

Disagreements often continue after a break up. However, the way they are approached can make a difference to the way your children experience the break up. It matters less that you split up, than how.

The way you talk to and act with your ex-partner will have an effect on your children. It is important that each parent supports their children to enjoy a positive relationship with the other parent. You and your ex-partner will have to work out what is best for each of you and for your children and how to involve each other in decisions.

Most parents find that putting aside their conflicts and disagreements and thinking about their children's needs can provide a way forward to negotiating arrangements.

Parentline Plus tips on negotiating with your ex-partner

- Decide which things you can compromise on, and which you can't. Things do change after you split up.
- There is no one 'right way' of making arrangements for the children, but research does show that it is best if children are raised by both parents whether or not they live together, as long as it is safe. This could be a 50/50 split, or an agreement that children stay with one parent during the week and the other at weekends.
- Do encourage and help your children to be in frequent contact with their other parent through face-to-face contact or by phone, post, email or text.

- Ensure arrangements reflect your child's social and school life. Older children are likely to have their own friendships, interests and hobbies, and this needs to be taken into account when you make arrangements for them.
- Although family and friends may be willing to help, and may have useful suggestions, make sure they are able to put the needs of your children first.

If things go wrong and arrangements break down, your children may react very strongly and could get very angry with both parents. Try talking to your child and see what you can come up with together to make things easier.

Stepfamilies – making it work

Children need time to adjust to new homes and families. To your child, a new partner is a stranger. They'll need time to get to know him or her and to trust them. Try not to push your child into giving your new partner affection. Let them get to know new family members in their own time.

Try to spend time alone with your child to reassure them that your love for them has not changed.

There are very real plus points about stepfamilies and children and adults can flourish. Evidence suggests that living between two households can make a real difference to children's sociability, flexibility, independence and resilience. For parents, sharing the care of their children can provide welcome breaks and a sense of shared responsibility.

Stepfamilies also bring with them new relationships – stepgrandparents and step (or half) brothers and sisters – so that children are being raised in networks of care and responsibility.

Parentline Plus tips on stepfamilies

- Give children their own space. When you set up home again with a new partner it is important that all the children have some privacy and a space they can claim as their own.
- Be patient – your children will need time to get to know and trust your new partner and their children.
- Keep a fair approach to all the children – there will be arguments but try not to side with your children rather than your partner's.
- Keep talking – with families joining together it is important to make time to listen to everyone's views and see if there are new ways of doing things that will keep most people happy.

- Allow children to be unhappy sometimes – it may be a new life for you and your new partner but for the children involved it will signal an end, allow them time to grieve for the old way.
- Involve older children in decisions around sharing two households; take their views into consideration when making future arrangements.
- Listen to your children even if the things they say are negative, it is important that they feel heard. Seek support for yourself if you find it hard to hear the things they say.

Doing the best you can is sometimes hard work and you may need someone to help you through. All parents need support and stepparents are no exception.

Learning to share with others

- Your child may have to learn how to share you and your ex-partner with others, like stepsisters or stepbrothers.
- Sometimes they may feel that they're not being treated fairly. Try to treat each child equally.
- Your child may also have to share their house and possessions with others. Personal space and privacy are important.
- If you're moving into the home of your new partner, encourage your child to bring their own things and give them a space or cupboard that they can call their own.



How to claim benefits and/or tax credits to help your family

There are lots of ways you can support your family by claiming benefits and/or tax credits. There are different types of support for children, parents and guardians.

- If you are responsible for bringing up a child under the age of 19, you may be able to claim child benefit. You may also be entitled to child tax credit.
- If you are working, you may be entitled to claim Working Tax Credit and may qualify for help with childcare costs.
- If you are separated, you may be able to claim child support from the parent who is not living with the child.
- There is a new deal for lone parents, which can help with the cost of childcare, training and transport.
- You can get help with your pension if you are divorced.

For more information on claiming benefits for your family, visit www.dwp.gov.uk. For further information on Tax Credits and Child Benefit go to www.hmrc.gov.uk. The *Separated or divorced* leaflet, which you can find on this website, provides a basic guide to benefits and tax credits for people who are separated or divorced. You can also find out more about child support in the *For parents who live apart* leaflet that you can download from the Child Support Agency website at www.csa.gov.uk

Want to find out more?

Parentline Plus

Offers help and information via a range of services including a free 24-hour confidential helpline, workshops, courses, information leaflets, email helpline and website.

Call the free, confidential, 24-hour helpline: ☎ **0808 800 22 22**. If you have a hearing or speech impairment, try the free textphone: ☎ **0800 783 6783**.

You can also email parentssupport@parentlineplus.org.uk For more information visit www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Families Need Fathers

Information and support on shared parenting issues.

www.fnf.org.uk or ☎ **08707 607 496** (Mon–Fri, 6.00–10.00pm)

Gingerbread

Freephone advice service for lone parent families.

www.gingerbread.org.uk or ☎ **0800 018 4318** (Mon – Fri, 10.00am–4.00pm)

One Parent Families

Free information on issues including benefits, tax, legal rights and family law.

www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk or ☎ **0800 018 5026** (Mon–Fri, 9.00am–5.00pm)

Relate

Relationship counselling and life skills courses.

www.relate.org.uk or ☎ **0845 456 1310** (Mon–Fri, 9.30am–4.00pm)

National Association of Child Contact Centres

Promotes safe child contact within a national network of child contact centres.

www.naccc.org.uk or ☎ **0845 4500 280** (Mon–Fri, 9.00am–1.00pm)

Child Support Agency

Responsible for assessing, collecting, paying and enforcing child maintenance.

www.csa.gov.uk or ☎ **08457 133 133**

National Family Mediation

Family mediation services.

www.nfm.u-net.com or ☎ **0117 904 2825** (Mon–Fri, 9.00am–3.30pm)

Directgov

Government advice and services. www.direct.gov.uk/divorceandchildren

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