

Dealing with Separation and Divorce



Please contact us on 0845 090 8044 for other leaflet formats e.g. large print, audio, another language or through discussion.

Did you know?

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

Positive things for parents to do when splitting up

- Ask for help early – families, friends and professionals can help you and your children to manage the difficult task of family change.
- Be honest with children about what is happening and what is going to happen.
- Reassure your children that it is not their fault and that both their parents love them.
- Allow children opportunities to talk about how they feel and be aware that mood and behaviour changes may be their reaction to the situation.
- 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.
- 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.
- Sort out details of contact, residency and finance calmly so that it is less painful for the children.
- Try to keep your children's school, interests and friendships as stable as possible.
- Allow time for everyone involved to adjust.

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.

Getting used to divorce, separating 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 confidantes, allies or friends.

Putting children first

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.

Children often blame themselves for family break up, thinking that what they did or said was the reason a parent left. Be honest with your children and make time to reassure them that it was not their fault.

Your children may be angry and show their distress in all sorts of ways. Sometimes children will focus all their anger on one or other parent, a brother or sister, or step-parent and blame them for the break up. Other reactions such as losing their temper, becoming moody, shouting, fighting, bullying, stealing, self-harming, substance misuse, and missing school are not unusual.

It's important that your child does not bottle up their feelings. Talk to them about the difficulties, be patient and loving. Giving them time and attention or praising them can all help.

Helping your child talk about their feelings

- Spend quality time with your child, giving them positive attention and opportunities to tell you about their feelings.
- When talking to your child, don't take over the conversation and tell them how they should feel. Help them to deal with their problems by listening to what they have to say, even if what they are telling you, such as how much they are missing the other parent is sometimes difficult to listen to.
- 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 you can help your child in dealing with it.
- Take care of yourself as a parent. Find 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.
- Hold family meetings and ask your child about their point of view on key decisions. They'll value being listened to. Try and make sure when any agreements are reached that everyone sticks to them.
- Your children may want to talk to someone outside their circle of family and friends. This is a mature step to take so let them know that you understand they cannot always tell you how they feel.

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

Research shows that is normally in the child's best interest if:

- Both parents raise children whether or not they live together as long as it is safe
- Each parent supports his or her children to enjoy a positive relationship with the other parent

Do encourage and help your children to have frequent contact with their other parent through face-to-face contact or by phone, post, email or text.

The way you talk to and act with your ex-partner will have an effect on your children. 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. How you manage the separation is the most important thing.

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.

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.

What to consider

- Develop a parenting plan and agree on how decisions are made about such things as education, healthcare, discipline, holidays and contact with extended family.
- Plan ahead and agree on how your child will spend time with each parent and how disputes will be resolved if parents can't agree.
- Try and talk effectively with your ex-partner and avoid verbal abuse in front of children. When children hear parents argue and fight, they feel threatened and insecure about what will happen to them.
- Don't criticise your ex-partner in front of your children. Also watch what you say to friends on the phone if your child can hear.
- Make sure your children are clear about arrangements for spending time with each parent. Be consistent and keep changes to arrangements to a minimum. Children like routine and predictability and they should not be exposed to sudden changes in arrangements unless it is unavoidable.
- Make sure 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.
- Special events such as Christmas bring family breakdown into sharp focus. Memories of times the family may have spent the whole day together can cause anxiety and distress. Planning ahead for these emotionally high risk times can ease your child's worries and anxieties.

What to consider

- If things go wrong and arrangements break down, your child 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.
- You may need to find some separate support to help you – a third party who is more objective. This could be a family member, a friend or an organisation (see contacts at the end of this booklet).
- 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 you really find there is no scope for compromise between you, parents do have a right to apply to the court for an order – about where your child will live, how often you can see him or her or other important decisions about your child's upbringing.
- The court's decision will always be based on what it considers to be in your child's best interests. For further advice consult a solicitor (see contacts at the end of this leaflet).

Keeping children safe

Family breakdown is a time when tensions are very high and violence can erupt. If it does, it is essential that you take steps to protect yourself and your children.

Children must be protected from hearing or witnessing harmful conflicts as well as being physically protected. There are instances where remaining in contact with a violent, abusive or dangerous parent is not in the child's best interests and you and your children should feel able to express this view and be supported to keep yourselves safe.

If you are affected by domestic violence or abuse and are not sure what to do, contact the National Domestic Violence helpline which is available free, every day, 24 hours a day on 0808 200 0247.

Stepfamilies - making it work

Children need time to adjust to new homes and families. On the one hand a child may be pleased for their parent and excited about the idea of having a new "dad" or "mum". On the other they may feel uncertain, sad, angry and rejected. They may feel left out of the new family or view their previously established position within a single parent family as threatened.

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.

Evidence suggests that living between two households can make a positive 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 – step grandparents and step (or half) brothers and sisters – so that children are being raised in networks of care and responsibility.

Top tips

- 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 or be overly harsh with your child in an attempt to appear fair.
- Discipline is often a source of friction. Unless both parents agree on their approach to discipline conflicts between partners may lead to inconsistent messages and the undermining of each parent in front of the children.
- Keep talking – with families joining together it is important to make time to listen to everyone's view and see if there are new ways of doing things that will keep most people happy.
- Involve older children in decisions around sharing two households; take their views into consideration when making future arrangements. Family meetings encourage children to express their opinions and to contribute toward solving problems. It is important though to avoid family meetings becoming "nagging" sessions and to ensure that agreed solutions are carried out. Family meetings tend to work best when they are kept short.
- Family celebrations such as holidays and birthdays and even daily rituals need to be recreated with their own identity without threatening old and familiar patterns children may want to hang on to. Effective communication and consultation among step family members is therefore vital to the success of the new family.
- Listen to your children even if the things they say are negative, it is important they feel heard. Seek support for yourself if you find it hard to hear the things they say.

Top tips

- All children will 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 to their old life. Allow them time to grieve for the old way.
- Doing the best you can is sometimes hard work and you may need someone to help you through. All parents need support and step-parents are no exception.

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 have a child under the age of 19 living with you, 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.
- The New Deal for Lone Parents is a voluntary Jobcentre Plus programme specifically designed to help lone parents into work. It can offer support with childcare, training and transport. Contact your local Jobcentre Plus office for more information.

For more information on claiming benefits for your family visit www.direct.gov.uk/en/MoneyTaxAndBenefits

For further information on Tax Credits and Child Benefit go to www.hmrc.gov.uk or call **0845 300 3900** (Tax Credit helpline) or **0845 302 1444** (Child Benefit helpline)

You can find out more about child supporting the “What is child maintenance and how does it affect me?” leaflet available from the Child Support Agency website at www.csa.gov.uk

Further help

Families Need Fathers

Information and support on shared parenting issues

Tel: **0300 0300 363**

(Mon – Fri, 6:00pm – 10:00pm)

Email: fnf@fnf.org.uk

www.fnf.org.uk

Gingerbread

Freephone advice service for lone parent families:

Tel: **0808 802 0925**

(Mon – Fri, 9:00am – 8:00pm)

www.gingerbread.org.uk

Parentline plus

Information on various parenting issues including a free 24 hour confidential helpline, workshops and courses

Tel: **0808 800 22 22**

Textphone: 0800 783 6783

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Relate

Relationship counselling and life skills courses

Tel: **0300 100 1234**

www.relate.org.uk

National Association of Child Contact Centres

Promotes safe child contact within a network of child contact centres

Tel: **0845 4500 280**

(Mon – Fri 9:00am – 1:00pm)

www.naccc.org.uk

Child Support Agency

Responsible for assessing, collecting, paying and enforcing child maintenance

Tel: **08457 133 133**

(Mon – Fri, 8:00 am – 8:00pm,

Saturday – 9:00am – 5:00pm)

www.csa.gov.uk

National Family Mediation

Family mediation services

Tel: **0300 4000 636**

(Mon – Fri 9:00am – 5:00pm)

Email: general@nfm.org.uk

www.nfm.org.uk

Directgov

Government advice and services

www.direct.gov.uk/divorceandchildren

ChildLine

Free, 24-hour helpline for children
in danger or distress

Tel: **0800 1111**

www.childline.org.uk

Itsnotyourfault

Information for children and young
people about divorce and separation

www.itsnotyourfault.org

National Domestic Violence Helpline

Free 24-hour helpline for women
experiencing physical, emotional or
sexual violence in the home

Tel: **0808 200 0247**

**[www.nationaldomesticviolence
helpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk)**

Triple P - Positive Parenting Program

Provide solutions for dealing with
parenting problems

www.triplep.net

Notes

A large, empty light blue rectangular area intended for taking notes, occupying the majority of the page below the 'Notes' header.

Contacting the Family Information Service

If you are looking for any further information or advice for your family the Family Information Service can help you. We offer a free and impartial information and signposting service for parents and carers of children and young people aged 0-20 on a range of topics such as; childcare, benefits, health, leisure and much more. If you don't know who to ask, ask the Family Information Service!

Opening Hours:

Monday to Thursday - 9.00am-5.30pm

Friday - 9.00am-5.00pm

Phone us:

0845 090 8044 (local Rate) or 01926 742274

(Voicemail for out of office hours)

Textphone: 01926 736327

Email us:

fis@warwickshire.gov.uk

Visit our website:

www.warwickshire.gov.uk/fis

Write to us:

Family Information Service

Children, Young People and Families

Saltisford Office Park, Ansell Way

Warwick CV34 4UL

