



Separated Parents Information Programme







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Introduction

In this handbook you'll find information on the process of becoming a separated parent, how it can affect you and your children, and how to change things for the better. It may seem like a lot to ask, but doing only one thing differently could lead to a whole range of possibilities that you never imagined could happen.

This handbook can be read alongside the 'Separated Parents Information Programme' or alongside one-to-one parent information meetings. The information is taken from a wide range of research into parenting after divorce or separation. It is divided into different parts that follow the legal, financial, parenting and emotional aspects of your divorce or separation. Each section has a different colour scheme so you can easily find the one you want.

When you go through separation as a parent, it's a little like starting a journey that you never intended to go on. When you're in a relationship, you have hopes for the future. Separating from your partner means that there is a loss of those hopes and expectations and you don't know the direction your life will go in.

Your children will be shaped very much by how their parents behave towards them about the loss and how they behave towards each other. Important decisions such as where your child or children will live, and how often they see each parent will of course affect them, and so will the level of conflict between you and your ex partner. You may not think or feel as if you have any influence over the level of conflict and that it just happens. However, as you read this book, we hope that you'll see that each parent, regardless of who is felt to be provoking conflict or not, can manage it so it is less harmful to their children. This book and the course it is part of is designed to give some ideas for how to manage disagreements and high emotions that happen between separated parents. Similarly they point out ways to help children manage their feelings and reactions to being children of separation.

Although the process of adjusting to being a separated parent will at some point come to an end, your journey through life with your children does not. The main change that has happened for you as a parent is in the relationship with your ex-partner. The change from being intimate partners to being parents with a businesslike relationship might feel like an uphill struggle, but you can use this handbook to point you in the right direction.

Though there may be parts of the process that you can't influence or change, you may take comfort in the fact that in the end you will have received some ideas for coping with the difficulties you face. For, if you can take even small steps now, you are at the beginning of the new voyage for yourself and your children.

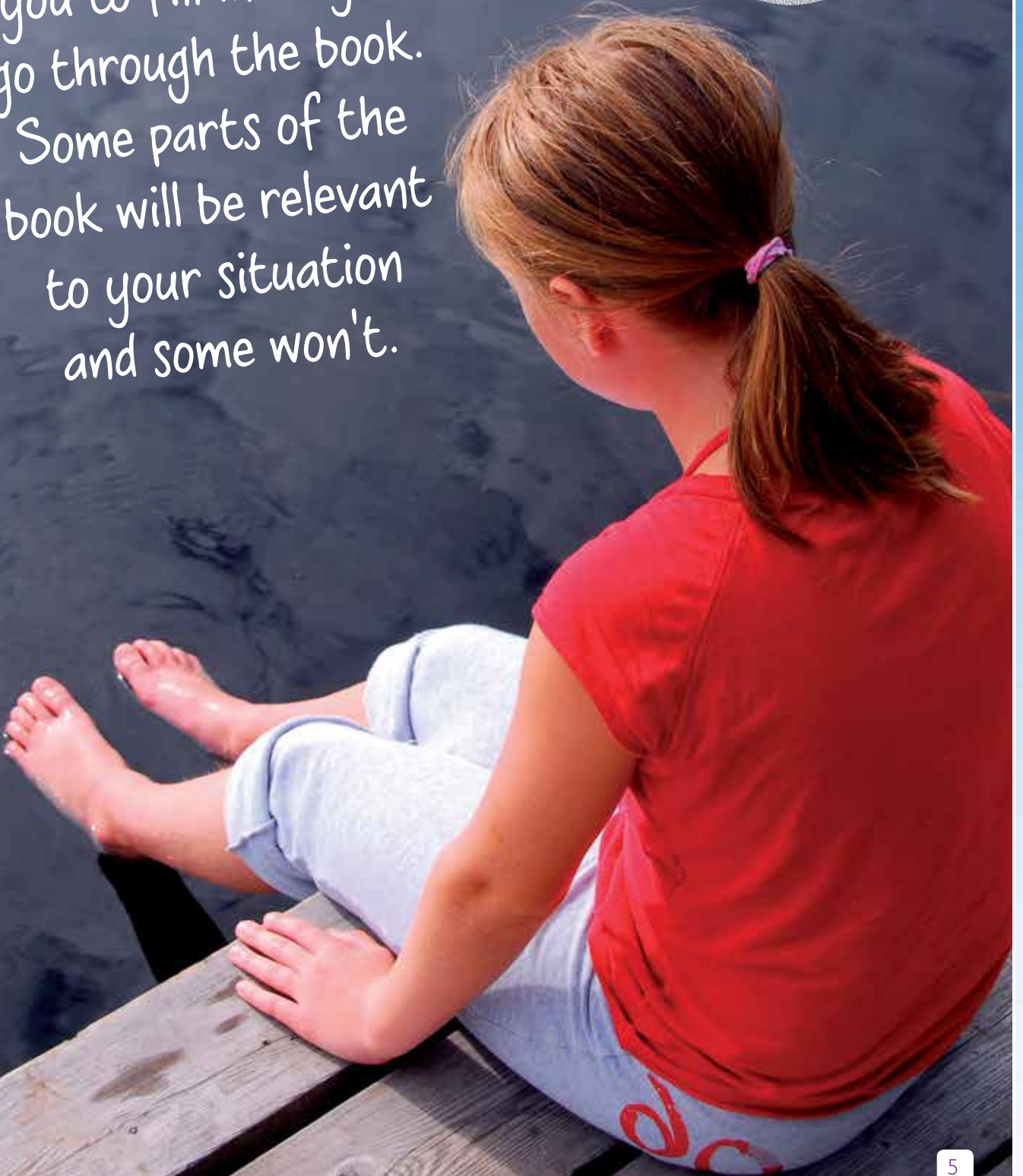


Two things that can really help you:

- * **The Parenting Plan:** to help you plan a structure for the children - www.cafcass.gov.uk/parentingplan
- * **Getting it Right for Children:** to help with skills you need to parent after a separation - search "Getting it Right for Children - the Parent Connection"



You can dip into the book whenever you need to, and there are worksheets for you to fill in as you go through the book. Some parts of the book will be relevant to your situation and some won't.



Your separated parenting journey



During your separation, it might sometimes feel like events just happen and that you don't have a choice over which road you take. However, even though it might not be easy, you can make some decisions that will have a positive effect on how your children experience the break-up.

If you think of your divorce or separation as a journey, is it on a winding road that has sharp bends and is difficult to travel or is it on a straight road that is easier to travel?

Look at the table on the following page and tick the boxes that most apply to you. Then add up the number of ticks for each type of journey.

Try to be as honest as possible when you do it as this information is for you. Nobody will judge you and you won't be asked to share what you write with anyone else.

Some blank rows have been added for you to write down anything you think of that isn't on the list.



Which road would you like to be on?



Your separated parenting journey

WINDING ROAD	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	STRAIGHTER ROAD	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
High conflict	<input type="checkbox"/>	Reduced conflict	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arguing in front of the children	<input type="checkbox"/>	Having a business-like conversation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Behaving in a blaming way	<input type="checkbox"/>	Behaving in a co-operative way	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not wanting to hear your children	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening to your children	<input type="checkbox"/>
Expecting your children to choose sides	<input type="checkbox"/>	Letting your children love both parents	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thinking about things from your own perspective	<input type="checkbox"/>	Thinking about things from your children's perspective	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trying to prove your ex-partner is in the wrong	<input type="checkbox"/>	Being prepared to admit your own mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Giving all of your emotional energy to the conflict	<input type="checkbox"/>	Allowing some time for yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thinking about what your ex-partner should or shouldn't do	<input type="checkbox"/>	Thinking about what you can do	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focusing on things you can't control	<input type="checkbox"/>	Focusing on things you can control	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going to court	<input type="checkbox"/>	I am thinking about using mediation	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
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	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Total number of ticks		Total number of ticks	



A 'HIGHWAY CODE'

As you go through this book you'll find various ideas that can make a difference to your children's lives. The most important of these are as follows.

- Try not to fight in front of your children or ask them to choose sides.
- Accept that your children's feelings may be different from yours.
- Think about what you can do, not what your ex-partner should or shouldn't do.
- Focus on what has worked, not on what hasn't worked.
- Remember, small steps can lead to big changes.
- Look after yourself and be the best parent you can be.



Did you know ?

According to 'Divorce & Separation Outcomes for Children' by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation: conflict appears to result in a number of negative effects for children, including problems with behaviour.



THE DIVORCE OR SEPARATION PROCESS

Your emotional separation

- When you separate you are likely to experience feelings of loss.
- Your feelings can be unpredictable and it can seem like you're on a roller coaster.
- You could feel overwhelmed and not able to think straight.
- Parents and children all need time to adjust to how life has changed.

The decision to end a relationship is not an easy one. It can be a time of great distress, upset and shock, and you might feel like your emotions are taking over your life. When you are feeling emotional, it can be really difficult to keep hold of any rational thoughts or to get a perspective on the situation so you can make the best decisions for you and your children. Many break-ups are fraught with tension and communication issues. This handbook gives many tips on how to manage your emotions.

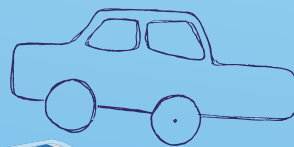
If your emotions are overwhelming you, you can ask a counsellor to help you manage the feelings that you are experiencing. You may also be able to find a child counsellor through your GP or your children's school. You can find out more about counselling on page 47.

Your parenting separation

- Even though you are no longer partners, you are still both parents.
- Children can cope well when their parents separate if there is little conflict and they have access to both parents and the rest of their family.
- Your parenting relationship continues, even though your relationship stops.

At first it may seem impossible to put aside the strong feelings you might have about your ex-partner so you can both co-operate over your children. The important thing to remember is that you don't have to be friends, you just need to be able to develop a businesslike relationship so that you can sensibly discuss your children with your ex-partner. If you are willing to make any necessary changes, this can make all the difference to how your children experience the separation.

Parents and children all need
time to adjust to how life
has changed.





Your parenting separation – children

Parenting questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to help you to focus on the strengths and positive qualities that you bring to parenting.

Name three things about yourself that you are proud of. Things you like about yourself.

Who is your role model as a parent, and what was the most important thing you learnt from this person? (This doesn't have to be one of your own parents.)

What parts of being a parent are you good at and what are your strengths as a parent?

Thinking about your children, how do you know when things are going well for them?

Name one positive change that you will make to help your children, using the strengths and positive qualities that you have identified.

WHAT CHILDREN SAY

Research shows that the way parents talk to children about the break-up, and the way they involve them in decisions during and after the separation, can affect how they adjust.

Most children and young people say that they still want to see both parents after the separation. Children who keep in contact with both parents after a divorce or separation have fewer adjustment problems than those children who lose contact with the parent they do not live with.

Here are some of the comments made by children and young people whose parents have separated.



Girl age 14

"They shouldn't say like it was mum's fault or dad's fault, or mum and dad are breaking up 'cos he's done this and that, you should say we are going through a hard time, ups and downs. And you shouldn't go straight to the problem 'cos it's just gonna give a negative approach to the whole thing."

Girl age 11

"If one of your parents is cheating then you wouldn't want to know about it."

Boy age 12

"You need to know what's happened to the dad because he's still part of the family."

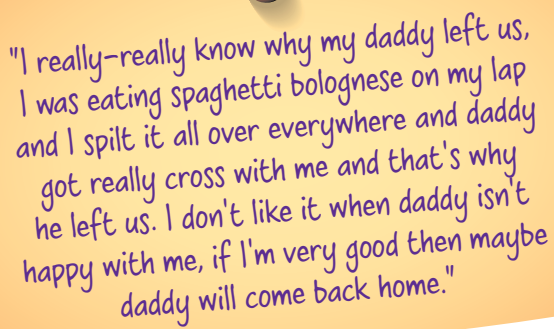


Girl age 17

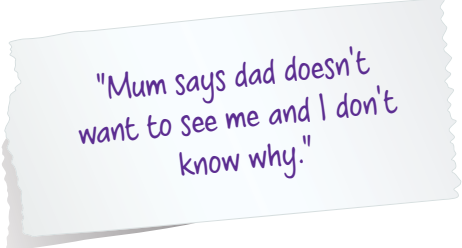
"Children should be involved in decisions about where they're gonna live, how often they will see the other parent, whether they have to move, move schools, if they are going to see their grandparents, cousins and relatives. They should have a say in that 'cos it's their family too and they should be asked how they feel about it."

(Quotes taken from "Young Voice Matters" issue 3, Emma McManus)

LISTENING AND HEARING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN



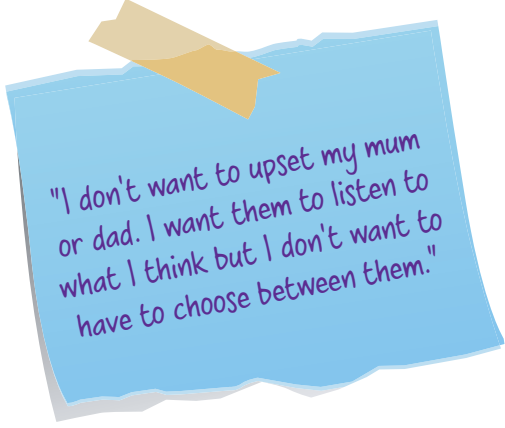
"I really-really know why my daddy left us. I was eating spaghetti bolognese on my lap and I spilt it all over everywhere and daddy got really cross with me and that's why he left us. I don't like it when daddy isn't happy with me, if I'm very good then maybe daddy will come back home."




"Mum says dad doesn't want to see me and I don't know why."

"I know that my mums both love me; I just wish they'd stop asking me who I love more."

"I just wish mum and dad would stop yelling at each other, I've tried to tell them but they don't listen to me. They didn't used to shout so much, I want it to be like it was before."




"I don't want to upset my mum or dad. I want them to listen to what I think but I don't want to have to choose between them."



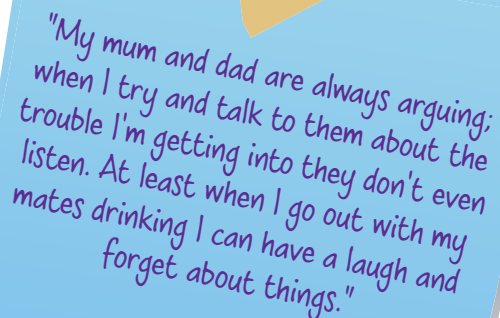
"My mum wants to take me on holiday but my dad doesn't want us to go in case she doesn't bring me back."

"I don't like it when my mum keeps asking me about my dad's new girlfriend."

"I live with my granddad 'cause my mum couldn't look after me. My mum says she's better now and wants me to live with her - but granddad says I can't."



"I'm not allowed to talk about my mum at home and that makes me sad."



"My mum and dad are always arguing; when I try and talk to them about the trouble I'm getting into they don't even listen. At least when I go out with my mates drinking I can have a laugh and forget about things."

"When I go to see my dad he gives me meat and I have to lie to mum - I should be able to decide for myself."



WHAT MOST CHILDREN WANT TO SAY TO THEIR PARENTS

- “Try not to argue in front of us.”
- “Tell us what is happening and why. But we don’t want to hear any personal details, or be involved in whose fault you think it was.”
- “Keep talking together about things that affect us in particular.”
- “We don’t like it, or you, if you criticise each other. It makes us feel bad and affects us at school and other places too.”
- “We are mostly sad or angry that you can’t live together anymore, but we can cope and get on with our lives, so long as you do too. If you don’t, we can’t.”
- “We need to be close to both of you.”
- “This means we like doing ordinary, everyday things with both of you - eating, playing, going to bed and getting up, going to school, watching TV...”
- “We know we can’t make the decisions, but we want to have a say in where we live and when we will see each of you.”
- “Remember we have our own lives and friends to see, so please allow us to ask for a change sometimes.”
- “We need to be able to relax in our own homes, have space and just be ourselves.”
- “We don’t mind if mum and dad do things differently. We can cope with different rules in different places.”
- “We just like being kids. We love you both, but do not want to be like a grown-up friend to confide in.”

Quotes taken from "What Most Children Say Parent Pocket Guide" Kent Family Mediation Service

WHAT CHILDREN NEED

Separation is difficult for everyone and you might feel that you're protecting your child by keeping things from them. However, children often feel powerless and confused if they don't know what's happening. You can help them by telling them in a way that's easy for them to understand. They don't need to know all of the details, but they do need to know about the things that will affect them.

Children often believe that they have done something to cause the break-up and that it is their fault that you are splitting up. Both parents need to let them know that it's not their fault. You might have to tell them this more than once.

Acknowledging your children's feelings can be difficult. Nobody likes to see their child hurting, and it can be tempting to try and make things better by buying them treats and spoiling them with expensive presents. This can lead to problems in the future as they will quickly learn that feeling sad and crying leads to mum or dad spoiling them. They need to feel able to express their feelings without being taught to turn to quick fixes. Help them to tell you what they feel and to express themselves in healthy ways. Tell them that it's OK to feel sad and to cry, and that you sometimes feel sad too.

Children don't need to feel that they are responsible for making decisions, but they do need to be consulted and feel that you are listening to them. You can listen to them when they tell you what they want, and also make it clear that you'll take their feelings into account, even though you can't always give them everything that they want. By doing this you'll be showing them that you understand how they feel.

Children often worry about being left by their parents. After all, if you left each other, you could do the same to them. It's important that you let them know that even though parents can stop loving each other, the love you have for them will last forever and that it's all right for them to love both parents without having to take sides.

You might have had different feelings about the best way to bring up children, even when you were together. Now that you have separated, you could still work together and agree on trying to have many of the same rules in each home, although this isn't always easy.

It's more important that children feel secure, know that things are going to be OK, and that each parent makes the decisions in their own homes.

As long as they know what to expect in each home, children can adjust to the differences.

Children often believe that they have done something to cause the break-up and that it is their fault that you are splitting up. Both parents need to let them know that it's not their fault.



Let your children
be children...



Children need the following.

- To be told what's happening and how their lives will change
- To know that it is not their fault
- To know that it's OK to feel angry and sad
- To know that it's fine to talk and ask questions
- To be listened to
- To know that their parents understand how they feel and still love them
- To feel good about loving both parents
- To know that it's alright to have different family rules in different houses.

MORE OF WHAT CHILDREN NEED

Children also need the following.

- To be allowed to distance themselves from their parents' conflict
- To have a predictable routine with consistent boundaries
- To know that they have two homes where they belong
- To be able to spend time with their brothers and sisters, and half brothers and sisters
- To be able to stay in contact with extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins
- To have access to other types of support if they want it
- To have hope for the future
- To above all, be allowed to be children.

You can teach your children that there are positive ways to deal with conflict by learning those ways yourself.

Seeing or hearing parents constantly fight or snipe at each other plays a big part in how children adjust to a break-up. They need to be able to separate themselves from the conflict and not feel as though they are caught in the middle.

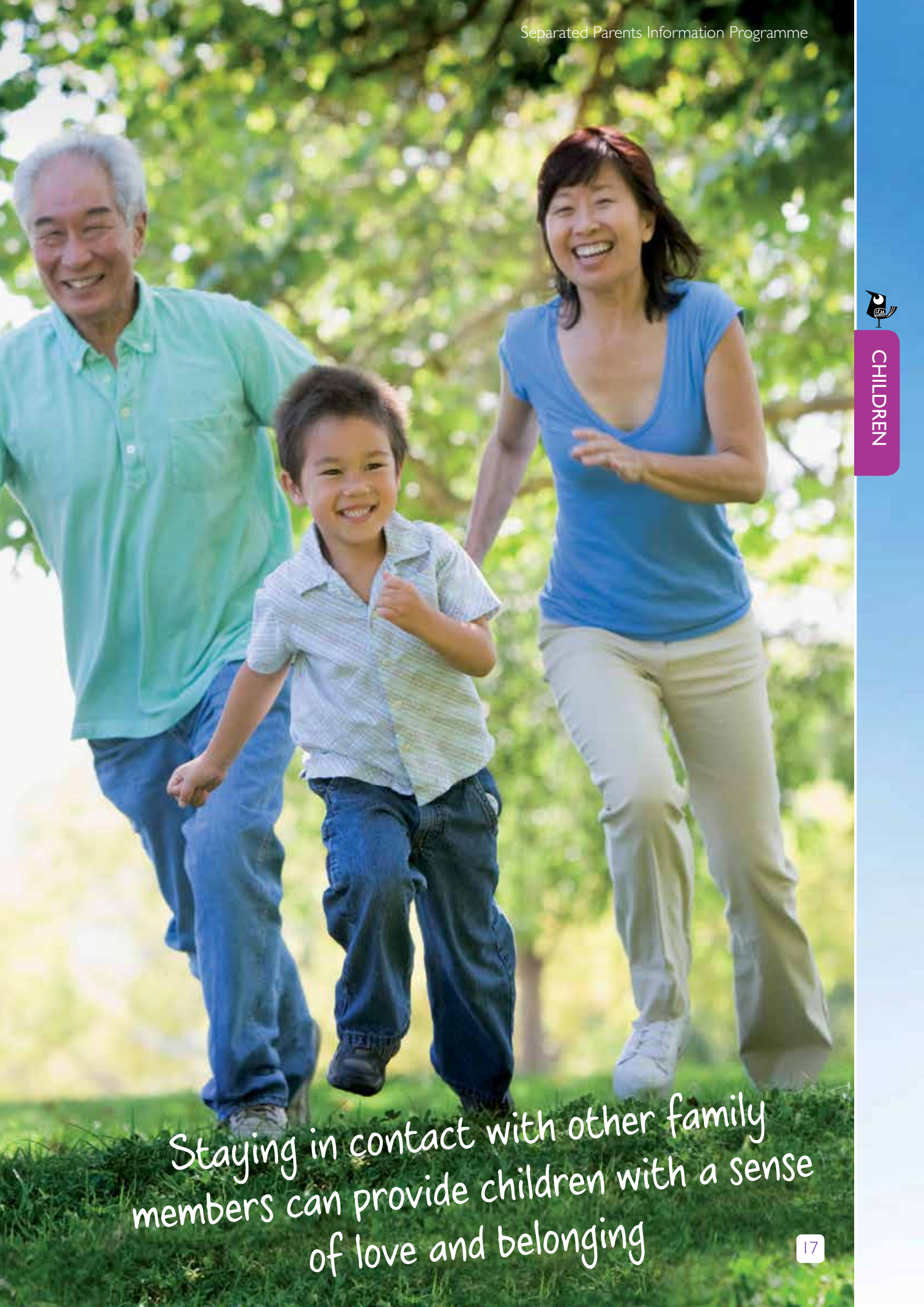
Children can accept change as long as there is not too much at any one time, and they know what to expect. If they feel that there is space for them in both homes, they'll feel more secure.

Children can sometimes take on too much responsibility and feel that they have to look after their parents and any brothers or sisters. Anyone looking at a child who behaves like this might think that they were coping very well and are not too upset. This often happens when parents are upset themselves. However, the impact of this might not show up until your child becomes an adult and it affects their future adult relationships.



You might find that your children are a great help to you and are coping very well, but as you begin to recover from your relationship ending, it may seem that your children are no longer coping and are quite distressed. You will then need to let them behave like children and let them know that it's OK to feel sad or cross. Some children might start acting younger than they are. This is temporary. Give your children time and attention and encourage them to talk to someone who they trust, such as a teacher, family member or counsellor. They should soon change for the better.

Children can feel a great sense of loss when parents break up. However, grandparents and other family members can often play a really significant role in their life. Staying in contact with them can provide a sense of family, love, and belonging, even when things are at their most difficult. Friends are also a good source of comfort to your children. Talk to your children about the important people around them and how they can stay in contact, especially if you are thinking about moving home. Children sometimes need extra support. You can talk to your child's teachers or your GP if you think that counselling might help your children.



Staying in contact with other family members can provide children with a sense of love and belonging

WHAT CHILDREN DON'T NEED

Children don't need the following.

- To hear or see their parents complaining about or blaming each other
- To hear criticisms or negative comments about either parent
- To hear adult information about the reasons for the separation or details about child support
- To feel that they may be asked to choose one parent over the other
- To pass messages from one parent to the other
- To feel like an outsider in one parent's home.

Conflict between parents can be very damaging for children, especially if you are fighting about them as this can make them feel responsible for the argument and the break-up. When you criticise your children's other parent, or make sarcastic remarks about them, you put your children in the middle of the conflict and they can feel that they have to choose between you.

Although you need to be honest with your children, they don't need to know all the details of why you are splitting up or about finances. That information will only leave them feeling confused and insecure. Try not to ask them to act as a go-between or messenger, or ask unreasonable questions about what happens in the other household. Children can become very resentful if they think that they're being used like a spy. Try to communicate as directly and simply as you can with your ex-partner.

The way you parent can be affected by things like whether you are leaving or you left, the level of conflict with your ex-partner; changes to financial circumstances, how involved you are in legal proceedings, and what information or support you can get. This can result in you feeling guilty or betrayed, overwhelmed and stressed. You could become hardened to the effect divorce has on children and be less available, emotionally and physically. This can lead to inconsistent parenting.

Remember – most children will be OK and small changes in your behaviour can make a big difference.

- By becoming aware of the ways separation can affect children, parents may reduce or prevent some of the negative effects.



(Information from Shifflett & Cummings 1999)

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN

- Tell your children what's happening and that it's not their fault.
- Tailor the discussion to the children's age and temperament.
- Let them know that they can talk to you about it again.
- Listen to them and talk to them about their feelings.
- Don't ask children to choose sides.
- Try not to argue, make sarcastic remarks or lose your temper in front of them.



Sometimes the children are the last to know about the break-up. Waiting until the last moment can seem like the right thing to do, but if one parent leaves suddenly this can be a huge shock and does not give them a chance to prepare for the changes that will happen. It can be tempting to put off telling them because you're finding it difficult enough dealing with your own feelings and emotions, let alone theirs.

When you do tell them, try to answer their questions as honestly and simply as you can. And make sure you allow plenty of time for the conversation, so that no one feels rushed. Tell them you're getting separated or divorced, and reassure them that you and your ex-partner both still love them, and that the decision to separate was not their fault.

If possible, you and your ex-partner should talk to your children together to tell them that you care about their feelings and to reassure them that it's OK to feel upset. Say that you will all work together to feel better, but that this might take time. Encourage your children to be open about how they feel, even if it is difficult for you to hear. They need to know that you will both continue to love them and stay involved in their lives, and that you feel sad about the break-up of the family and they are likely to feel sad too. Also bear in mind that they might not want to talk to you about their feelings at this time. If so, just let them know that you'll be there when they do want to talk.

Be prepared to answer the same question many times, and don't expect your children to choose between you or to take sides. Be honest with your children and resist the temptation to blame, criticise or insult your ex-partner. When trying to decide what level of detail to tell your children about the divorce or separation, ask yourself how knowing the details will help them.

Remember, your relationship as a couple is over but your relationship as parents is not.

Your children might want answers to the following questions.

- Who will I live with?
- Where will my pet live?
- Where will mum and dad live?
- Will I be able to spend time with my brother or sister?
- Will I still be able to see my grandparents?
- Will I have to change schools?
- What about the holiday we were going on?
- Can I still go to scouts, the club, my friends' houses?





LISTENING TO YOUR CHILD AFTER SEPARATION

Separation is usually emotionally difficult for parents and for children, but being able to listen really well to your child might be the key to helping them – and you. However hard you try, it is very likely that your child will pick up your anxious, distressed or negative feelings. These feelings can get in the way of listening, but only by listening well and openly to them can you find out what is actually worrying your child.

But when your own feelings could be a mixture of anger, sadness and worry, it is not so easy to set those feelings to one side and really listen to your child. Their feelings could be different to yours, and how you respond can significantly affect their wellbeing.

What can help you is to develop your emotional 'readiness' – to really listen and respond. This means acknowledging your own feelings, and any negative thoughts about the other parent, and then being able to set them aside so that you can really listen to your child. Then you can understand them better and respond in the ways that most help.

Step 1

It's very common to feel a range of negative feelings during a separation, for example, worry, anger, sadness, fear or powerlessness. Sometimes these can seem overwhelming. Feelings don't go away if you pretend they are not there – sometimes that can lead to them coming out in unpredictable ways.

In step 1 you identify some of those feelings for yourself, accepting that they can be distressing and also seeing that they are normal feelings in the early stages of a separation. You may find it helps to write them down. These are the feelings that you will need to keep in check while listening to your child. Putting a label on how you feel can help you feel in control.

Step 2

This step is about communication skills and there is more about it in the communication section of this handbook starting on page 26.

Staying calm will help you to keep your feelings in check – there are some simple but effective exercises in the communication section. These can help you to put your feelings to one side and start to focus on listening to your child. You might find it helpful to repeat the exercises several times.

Learning to listen is a really important skill, so take some time to think about and practise the listening skills on page 27 – you can practise listening with your child, whatever they are telling you, and you can do this with some of their day-to-day worries or triumphs before talking about the bigger things.

Seeing things differently is about seeing your child's perspective and keeping your own feelings about the other parent separate. A really helpful tip when listening to your child is not to jump in too quickly with your own theories or solutions – leave a little space and try to see your child's point of view.

Step 3

This is about reassuring your child – they might feel powerless about what is happening.

However, reassurance works only when it is:

- possible – you can only reassure your child about what you know you can deliver on;
- a real example of how things will be and how they will work – make it real and concrete; and
- honest and ongoing. If there are some things you are not yet sure you can deliver, the best way to help your child is to say 'We don't yet know, but we will be working on that', and keep them updated on when you can give them at least some information.

When reassuring your child, look at the areas where things will not change. This may be the relationship with both parents, or school, friends or routines. Spell out what any changes might be and how you will help them through these. Try to agree and stick to a plan for contact with the other parent and with grandparents or other important people in their lives. Depending on their age and ability to understand, involve your child in expressing their view about what any changes will look like. Make sure that you do what you have said will happen.



Some tips that can help:

- Help your child to put a name to a feeling. Sometimes putting a name to it can make an overwhelming feeling seem more under control.
- Look at your child's body language and behaviour – this might help you to offer a good guess about how they might be feeling. You can suggest a possible feeling, without any judgement, and help your child to put a name to how they feel. This helps to make it OK to talk about how they are feeling – you have the words and a safe place to talk about them.
- Once you have labelled a feeling together, reassure them that it is a normal feeling in the circumstances.
- To spot a child's difficulty in expressing distressing feelings, look for changes in their behaviour, trouble at school, falling out with friends, or being unusually quiet.
- Look out for your child ending conversations about separation or the other parent too early – this might mean that there is more that your child needs to talk about.
- If you need some help with how your child is feeling, talk to your GP, school counsellor, school nurse or other health worker.

It is best if parents can cooperate about listening to their child, and respond with realistic and long-term plans. However, sometimes a child needs to talk things over with someone else, especially if there are court proceedings over him or her. Mediators, Cafcass workers reporting to courts, and the courts themselves will want to make sure that they understand and can represent the wishes and feelings of your child – as well as make sure safety and protection issues are in place.

Including children and young people directly in mediation makes sure that the parents listen to the child when making decisions. While many children want to take part in mediation, others do not want to talk to someone outside the family, so taking part is always voluntary. Mediators and practitioners who are skilled in talking with children can give a child the opportunity to speak with an independent person so that they can express their thoughts and feel that they have been listened to. You can find mediators who currently offer this by going to www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk. Not all mediators offer children the opportunity to take part directly at the moment, but all mediators will help parents to talk with and listen to their children so that parents can make decisions which are the best for each child.

Cafcass workers do not meet all children because sometimes families can sort things out on their own. If the court has asked Cafcass to produce a report, a Cafcass worker will nearly always talk to your child (depending on their age and understanding) about their wishes and feelings and what they would like to happen. The Cafcass worker will not ask your child to make a decision or choose between you and the other parent. The Cafcass worker will usually talk to your child alone. There is more information on the Cafcass website www.cafcass.gov.uk/grown-ups/parents-and-carers/resources-parents-carers/

Sometimes it is appropriate for a child to communicate their views directly to court, and a Cafcass worker can help with this. The leaflet 'CB7 Guide for separated parents: children and the family courts' www.hmctsformfinder.justice.gov.uk/courtfinder/forms/cb007-eng.pdf also provides information about children's communication with the court.

If it is necessary for someone else to listen to your child it is important that you encourage your child to express their own (not your) views. There is information that might help your child express their views that you can find here www.cafcass.gov.uk/grown-ups/parents-and-carers/divorce-and-separation/childs-voice-separation.

However, you need to take care that your child does not get caught in the middle or feel pressured into taking sides. This can be very upsetting for children and can damage their relationship with both parents (and can very often be obvious to professionals working with you).

Helpful tips to avoid 'coaching' or pressurising a child:

- Make sure that you understand your feelings and have been able to set them to one side (be emotionally ready) before talking to your child – see above.
- Make sure that your child knows that both parents are listening, and are talking to each other about what they are hearing.



TYPICAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

(There are no typical children.)

- Clinging to one or both parents
- Rejecting one or both parents
- Being upset and crying
- Being aggressive and blaming one or both parents
- Behaving differently or having problems at school
- Becoming more adult and 'looking after' one or both parents
- Being very good or misbehaving in the hope that this will bring parents back together.

The way a child responds can depend on how old they are.

HOW CHILDREN ADJUST

How a child adjusts to the situation depends on the following.

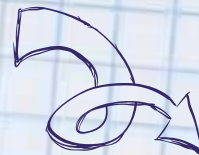
- The level and intensity of conflict
- Loss of contact with a parent, brother, sister, other close family member or friends
- Their parents' ability to adjust
- The level of support they get from their parents
- Changes in their household's finances
- The speed and amount of change – new partners, where they live, changing schools, access to friends
- Their personality, age, gender and stage of development.



On the following page there is a table of age-related reactions that children might have to their parents' break-up. The age bands are not fixed and children can respond in different ways.

If your children seem to be very unhappy, you may want to ask the school if they can provide a specialist child counsellor.

How children react to separation and how to help them



Age	Reactions	How to help
Up to one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying, clinging, being irritable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be consistent with your care for your child. Be patient with them.
Two to five years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaving younger than they are • Complaining of mysterious pains and being in distress • Aggressive, defiant, argumentative, attention-seeking • Being clingy and possessive • Not sleeping well • Blaming themselves and worrying about being abandoned or sent away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to maintain routines (especially at bedtime) to help your child feel more secure. • If you are the main carer, try not to be away for long periods as this may make them feel insecure. • Reassure your child that the split is nothing to do with anything they have done, and that both parents still love them. • Tell their nursery or school about the situation and any changes to it.
Five to eight years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling lost, rejected, guilty • Feeling disloyal to the parent they do not live with, and showing concern and longing for them • Feeling disloyal to the parent they live with when they see their other parent • Behaving younger than they are • Crying • Being sensible, appearing to cope well and being composed • Thinking it is their fault 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the reasons for any changes to their lives. • Avoid being angry. • Reassure them that they are loved, it is not their fault, and that it is OK to be upset. • Tell their school about the situation and any changes to it.

FRIEND



Age

Reactions

How to help

Nine to 12 years old

- Taking sides with one parent
- Crying
- Appearing to want to grow up too quickly or behaving like your parent or a replacement partner
- Behaving like another adult, perhaps a brother or sister, rather than a child

- Assure them that you will continue to care and look after them.
- Be positive about the other parent.
- Avoid arguing in front of them.
- Tell their school about the situation and any changes to it.
- Encourage them to mix with their friends.

13 to 18 years old

- Any of the previous reactions
- Avoiding their own feelings by distancing themselves
- Showing contempt to one or both parents
- Acting more independent than they should be or need to be
- Having discipline problems at home or at school
- Being compassionate, arrogant, idealistic, angry or suffering from fatigue and having physical complaints

- Give them space to discuss their feelings.
- Make sure you do not rely on them to give you emotional support.
- Allow friends to visit them at both homes.

Over 18 years old

- Showing extreme attitudes in their own relationships
- Losing confidence and distancing themselves

- Be honest about what's happened and provide hope for the future of their relationships. Just because it hasn't worked for you, it doesn't mean that their relationships will fail.



When you are dealing with your own strong emotions, it can be difficult to think about how other people (including your children) might be feeling.

Children's feelings are important and they may also be experiencing a huge range of emotions.

You can help them understand their feelings by talking to them about how they feel.

You might find that you need to help them put their feelings into words. Be guided by their behaviour and try to listen and let them express their feelings without immediately offering solutions.

You could say: 'It seems like you're feeling sad right now' or 'Do you know what's making you feel so sad?' You could also ask them what they think will help them feel better, and offer a few suggestions if they can't think of anything themselves.

You can also encourage them to talk to friends, grandparents, teachers, neighbours or anyone else they feel comfortable with.

WHAT YOUR CHILDREN COULD BE FEELING

- Angry, jealous, guilty
- Distressed, sad, depressed
- Rejected, hurt, powerless
- Safe, calm, relieved
- Hopeful, accepting, happy
- Disbelief, shocked, surprised
- Frustrated, confused, anxious
- Lonely, afraid, scared

You can help your children understand their feelings by having conversations with them about how they feel.



Your parenting separation – communication



IMAGINING A FUTURE CONVERSATION

The aim of this exercise is to help you to see things from your children's point of view. You may have hopes and dreams for your children, but it can be really easy to get caught up in the day-to-day parts of our own lives and forget about them. It can be really useful to take a step back and think about what you want for them in the future.

Imagine your children talking to a friend in 10 to 15 years from now.

What do you **hope** they won't be saying?

Handwriting practice area with 10 horizontal dashed green lines for writing.

What do you **hope** they will be saying?

Handwriting practice area with 10 horizontal dashed green lines for writing.



HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Sometimes it can feel like every conversation you have ends up in a vicious circle. 'Blaming' language is used, and nobody really gets what they want because everyone is so busy trying to get their point across. If you get angry, it is easy to stop listening and to become defensive.

You then start to feel stressed and your body releases lots of chemicals that can affect how you think. You might start feeling angry or feel like running away.

If this sounds like the sort of thing that happens to you, try using the following techniques.

Reduce your stress levels

Staying calm: managing yourself techniques:

- Relax your shoulders.
- Breathe slowly and deeply through your middle (rather than shallowly through your chest).
 - Take deep breaths and deliberately breathe more slowly. This helps to change the stress chemicals that your body is making and can help you to feel calmer.
- Take a time-out:
 - When you are stressed you can't think clearly.
 - Even small bite-sized breaks while you relax through deep breathing helps you to think clearly.



Listen to what is being said

- Actively listen. The more you listen and the less you say the better.
- Try to focus so your attention isn't divided.
- Take a position of curiosity. You might be surprised or wrong about what you expect to hear.
- Only listen. If you are talking it means you aren't listening. You can't do both at the same time.
- Take your turn to talk after you've listened. You are more likely to be listened to if you've listened well yourself.
- Leave pauses, don't jump into one.
- Listen carefully to the words and also watch for body language.
- Try to stay calm, even if you don't feel calm.
- Take big time-outs.
- When things begin to get heated, don't wait for the other person to calm down, suggest taking a break.
- If you both can't calm down through a small time-out:
 - Stop the discussion.
 - Suggest that you will find a better time for it. If possible in a neutral place that is away from the children.





Respond in a non-confrontational way: Be clear, stick to the point and stick to the rules

1. Avoid changing the subject or interrupting unnecessarily.
2. Avoid speaking too soon, too often or for too long.
3. Use simple, direct statements and requests.
 - Stick to one subject.
 - Think which is the single most important point or request. Stick to that one. Take things one at a time.
 - Sit on the urge to interrupt. Take deep breaths and bite your tongue.
 - Avoid speaking too soon, too often or for too long. Keep things short and simple.
 - Take deep breaths to pause so you can do this.

Speak for yourself

- Use 'I' statements
 - Phrase things in a way that is about what you think or have noted or want, not what you assume or 'know' the other person does.

For example:

"I feel angry when you ask me about money in front of the children."

rather than

"You always try to stir things up by asking about money. You know I hate it!"

- When at a difficult point, though the urge is to hope the other will come around, take a small time out.
 - Take a deep breath, stop and think.

"What one simple thing can I myself, do?"

Then, phrase it in offer form:

For example,

"I can check with the school for you to see if they have your new email address."



Try using the method below to express yourself

1. State what has happened without blaming, criticising or judging.
2. Say how you feel when you see or hear what has happened.
3. Say what you need to happen.
4. Ask for a change.

In other words, say:

When you...

I feel...

because I need...

and I'd like
you to...

There are some examples
on the next page

You could also try to say "we", turn the problem into an "it" instead of blaming anyone and then make an offer. This way the other person won't feel as defensive.



Examples include the following.

'When you pick the children up and you're late, I feel anxious because I need a set routine and I'd like you to be on time.'

'When you stop me from seeing my children overnight, I feel upset because I need to keep a connection with them and I'd like you to help to arrange for this to happen.'

You are giving your point of view in a non-judgemental way, saying how you feel and linking it to what you need and what you want to happen.

Think about the things that you want to express or the times that you're likely to end up arguing and practise saying things differently.

Fill in your own example.

When you

.....
.....

I feel

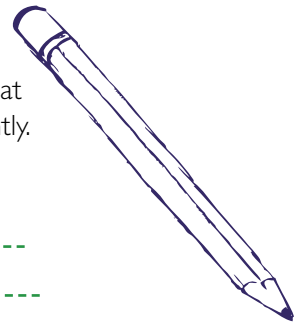
.....

because I need

.....

and I'd like you to

.....
.....
.....



If this doesn't work try a slightly different way of expressing what you want to say.

"When we talk about money in front of the children, it turns into a problem. Can we talk about it at another time?" Offer: "When would be good for you?"

Fill in your own example.

When we

.....
.....

It turns into

.....
.....

Can we?

.....
.....

When would?

.....
.....



TIPS FOR CONTACT

- Children should feel that they have a home with both parents, regardless of the amount of time they spend with them.
- Expect resistance from children as they adjust.
- Avoid using children as messengers or go-betweens.
- Try not to criticise, find fault, or compare the two homes.

Wherever possible and safe, children need to have access to both parents. If your child says they don't want to see you or their other parent, don't dismiss their feelings or contradict them. Listen to what they say, try to find out if there is a reason, and don't blame them for the rejection.

Sometimes children see one parent as all good and one parent as all bad. If this happens, remind them of the good times you had together before the separation. Children think of themselves as half of mum, and half of dad. If they aren't allowed to love both parents, they can end up rejecting a part of themselves. So try not to criticise or blame each other in front of your children, but remind them that there is good and bad in all of us.

Children are resilient and can live with different family rules if they know what to expect. If your children say things like 'mum does this differently' or 'dad doesn't do things like that', remind them that it is a parent's job to set limits and that although you do things differently you both love them and that it is OK to have different rules in different homes.

Avoid questioning children about what happens in the other home. It can feel like an interrogation. Whenever possible, communicate directly with your ex-partner.

Try not to get into a competition with the other parent about who gives the bigger birthday presents, or give gifts with strings attached. When giving a large gift, think about which household it will stay in. If it is to stay at your home, it's best to let the child know beforehand.

Giving children information about what is happening and what to expect will make them feel more secure. For example, you could put important dates on a calendar together. However, not everything in life is predictable and changes might need to take place.



Always think about what is in the best interests of your child and tell them about any changes.



FURTHER TIPS FOR CONTACT


- Develop a practical relationship with the other parent, which is centred around being able to negotiate with each other for the best interests of your children.
- Wherever possible, take a flexible and willing to compromise stance.
- Don't discuss things that might lead to an argument in front of the children. Agree to take it up elsewhere at another time.
- Use safeguards if you are concerned about conflict during the handover.
- Remember the parent the children live with is likely to experience different feelings to the other parent.

Keep conversations focused on what's best for your children. Communicate in a businesslike way about the needs of your child – things like medical appointments, parents' evenings, sports days and birthday parties.

If your children say things about what your ex-partner has said or done and this arouses strong feelings in you, don't overreact or retaliate because this puts children in the middle.

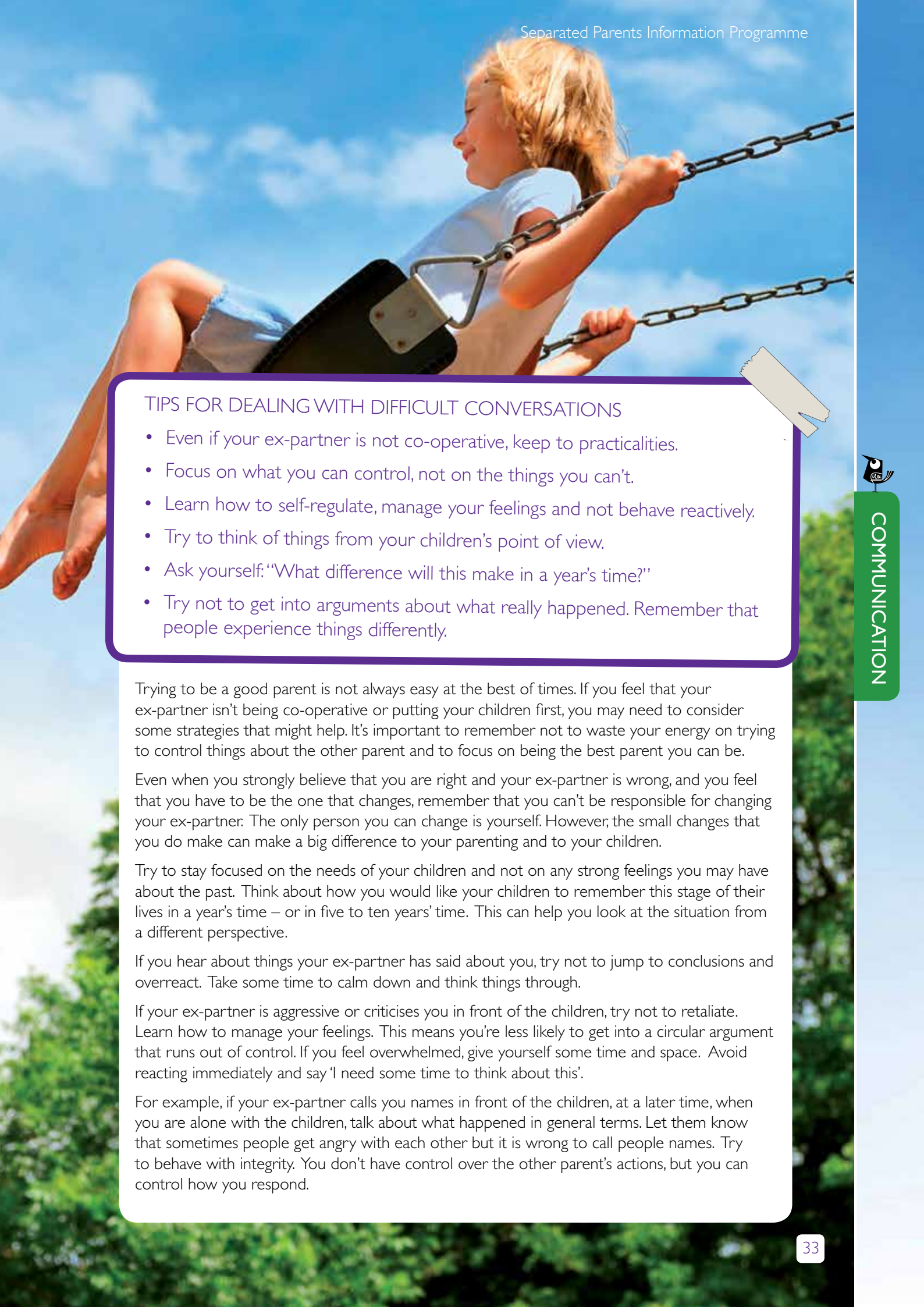
If you have strong concerns about the level of conflict that might occur when you hand over your children, there are certain things that you can do, like having another adult there, handing over in a public place and in daylight, having a friend or family member hand over for you, or using a contact centre.

Although everyone is different, if your children live with you, you might feel that you are the one that has all the responsibility and that you have no time to yourself. If the children do not live with you, you might long for the feeling of being a family and feel lost, not knowing how to fill your time.



Even if you are in a one-bedroom flat, it's important to find a space for your children's belongings (even if it is only a corner in a room). This will help them feel that they are still an important part of your life and help them to feel more secure. Don't treat your child like a guest in your home. Create new family activities and routines that will help them to feel more secure.





TIPS FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

- Even if your ex-partner is not co-operative, keep to practicalities.
- Focus on what you can control, not on the things you can't.
- Learn how to self-regulate, manage your feelings and not behave reactively.
- Try to think of things from your children's point of view.
- Ask yourself: "What difference will this make in a year's time?"
- Try not to get into arguments about what really happened. Remember that people experience things differently.

Trying to be a good parent is not always easy at the best of times. If you feel that your ex-partner isn't being co-operative or putting your children first, you may need to consider some strategies that might help. It's important to remember not to waste your energy on trying to control things about the other parent and to focus on being the best parent you can be.

Even when you strongly believe that you are right and your ex-partner is wrong, and you feel that you have to be the one that changes, remember that you can't be responsible for changing your ex-partner. The only person you can change is yourself. However, the small changes that you do make can make a big difference to your parenting and to your children.

Try to stay focused on the needs of your children and not on any strong feelings you may have about the past. Think about how you would like your children to remember this stage of their lives in a year's time – or in five to ten years' time. This can help you look at the situation from a different perspective.

If you hear about things your ex-partner has said about you, try not to jump to conclusions and overreact. Take some time to calm down and think things through.

If your ex-partner is aggressive or criticises you in front of the children, try not to retaliate. Learn how to manage your feelings. This means you're less likely to get into a circular argument that runs out of control. If you feel overwhelmed, give yourself some time and space. Avoid reacting immediately and say 'I need some time to think about this'.

For example, if your ex-partner calls you names in front of the children, at a later time, when you are alone with the children, talk about what happened in general terms. Let them know that sometimes people get angry with each other but it is wrong to call people names. Try to behave with integrity. You don't have control over the other parent's actions, but you can control how you respond.





IF YOU CAN'T BE WITH YOUR CHILDREN

If you are finding it difficult to see your children regularly because of a difficult relationship with your ex-partner, or you are living out of the country or a long way away, then the tips below are for you.

Letters

- Don't forget to write regularly – either by post or by email.
- For younger children, choose nice stationery, or computer art, stickers, coloured pens and so on.

DVDs

- Record a DVD of yourself doing things or making a special message.

Phone calls

- Make sure that you listen as well as talk and try not to worry about phone charges.
- Try to keep up-to-date about their school, their friends and so on. If you're stuck for conversation, share a book or video with them and discuss it on the phone.
- Many children also have mobile phones – so you could keep in touch by text message.

Accommodation

- When you see them, make the home you live in as family-friendly as possible, with toys, spare clothes and so on. Try to make sure they have their own space if possible.

Birthdays and special occasions

- Remember the special days. You can make them more special by being thoughtful about the things you send. A card or letter will also show that you are thinking of them.

Sometimes being a parent can be very stressful. Children may not appreciate all the effort you put into it. It's normal, so try not to give up, as no amount of letters and phone calls can make up for not being there in person. You can try to open up channels of communication with your ex-partner or consider moving closer. You could also use mediation to help you to discuss matters and only go back to court if absolutely necessary.



NEW PARTNERS

Children often need their parents more in the early days of a separation and can feel abandoned if you go out a lot or start dating other people. They can often appear quite disapproving, and can feel threatened by any new relationships you have. It is important that any changes to their lives start gradually. However, they mustn't feel that they can dictate what you can or cannot do.

It is probably better to wait for any new relationship to become more serious before introducing the person to your children. Children can get attached to new people quickly, and introducing them to partners who aren't going to be around in the long term could leave them open to another significant loss. Also, when you have a new relationship, make sure that it is safe for your children to be around your new partner.

Introducing a new partner to children can shatter any hopes they might have of their parents getting back together. Ideally, a new partner should be introduced sensitively over a period of time, starting with no more than an hour or so.

Children can be afraid that you will prefer being with your new partner than with them, and that they might lose you as well. They could react by being more emotionally dependent and possessive than before. You can listen to their feelings, reassure them that you would never leave them, and understand that their feelings of jealousy are normal in this situation.

Your new partner might also feel insecure and jealous of the time and energy you spend with your children. Although you can try to reassure your new partner, it isn't always possible to do this. You might then have to reconsider how important your new relationship is to you.

You might also have strong feelings about your ex-partner's new partner, and feelings of anger and jealousy could be stirred up. It's important to remember to put your children first in this case. You and your children will need time to adjust to the changes ahead. Even if you think you might be ready to have a relationship, it doesn't necessarily mean that your children will be ready. You'll need to make sure that they have time to adjust to any new relationships.

If you have met someone and you're thinking of living with them, it's important that you talk to them about their role as a step-parent. Learning how to live together will take time and needs to be balanced with your children maintaining a relationship with their other parent. If your new partner already has a family, it can help to agree on house rules before moving in together.





DOMESTIC ABUSE

If violence or abuse has happened it is important to remember that the children's or abused parent's safety is the first priority.

If you are on a training course or having individual sessions and need to talk to someone about any risk to you or your children, talk to the course trainer or the practitioner you are having your sessions with. They will be able to support you and help you get the help you need.

If there has been abuse, limited contact between parents, as well as with children, may be in the children's best interests. Legal support can also play an important role in keeping everyone safe.

If you find yourself in an abusive situation, get help for you and your children immediately.

- You can contact The National Domestic Violence Helpline (by Freephone on 0808 2000 247 or by visiting the website at www.refuge.org.uk) to get information on and access to 24-hour emergency accommodation.
- You can phone the NSPCC's National Child Protection Helpline on 0808 800 5000. This provides a free, confidential service for anyone concerned about children at risk.



The National Domestic Violence Helpline
0808 2000 247
NSPCC's National Child Protection Helpline
0808 800 5000



If children talk about harming themselves or not wanting to live, if the school reports problems that go on for months, or if you feel that you cannot cope with your child's behaviour, you should find help. You could:

- see your GP
- talk to your child's teacher, head of year or headteacher
- see a counsellor
- talk to your Cafcass worker
- talk to your social worker.



Your emotional separation



THE LOSS OF A RELATIONSHIP

Grief is an important part of the separation process, and knowing about the stages of loss can help you through the process. When a partner dies there is a set ritual – having a funeral and so on – and grieving is accepted as being natural. For a break-up, grief may not be acknowledged or accepted, and there is no set ritual (although some people may latch on to the court process in place of this).

You may both be at very different stages of loss. The one who decides to leave has often already experienced many of the feelings associated with grief and loss before leaving the relationship, whereas the other person has still to experience them.

There are many losses that arise when a relationship ends – the loss of being part of a family, the loss of a partner, the loss of future plans and goals as a couple, the loss of the role as a husband, wife or lover, and the loss of the status of being part of a couple.

Many people have to move from the home they lived in during the relationship, and so may also suffer the loss of their home. Each parent can also experience the loss of their relationship with their children when they are with the other parent. Feelings of loss are not only experienced by the adults, they are also felt by the children.

EMOTIONS

Divorce or separation is personal and everyone will experience it differently. You could feel a sense of relief that your relationship has come to an end or feel a failure because you were powerless to stop it from ending. You may have both decided that a divorce is the right way forward, or one of you may feel more sure about breaking up than the other.

If you have decided to leave the relationship, you may have been thinking about it for a long time, building up the courage to leave, perhaps resulting in feelings of guilt.

If you are the one who has been left, this might have come as a shock and you may feel a sense of rejection or abandonment.

If the break-up is sudden and without warning, your feelings could be more intense than if the relationship had broken down over a long period of time. Your feelings are also likely to be more intense if you have been left than if you are the one who decided to leave.

The pain of a break-up can be deep and intense. It can be experienced physically as you feel that your heart has quite literally been broken. Your emotions can also affect your ability to make decisions and make you feel tired and lacking in energy, although the extent of these feelings depends on the circumstances.





Whatever the situation, you are likely to experience the following stages of loss and you don't necessarily go through the stages in order. It is also possible to feel the whole range of emotions in the space of 10 minutes!

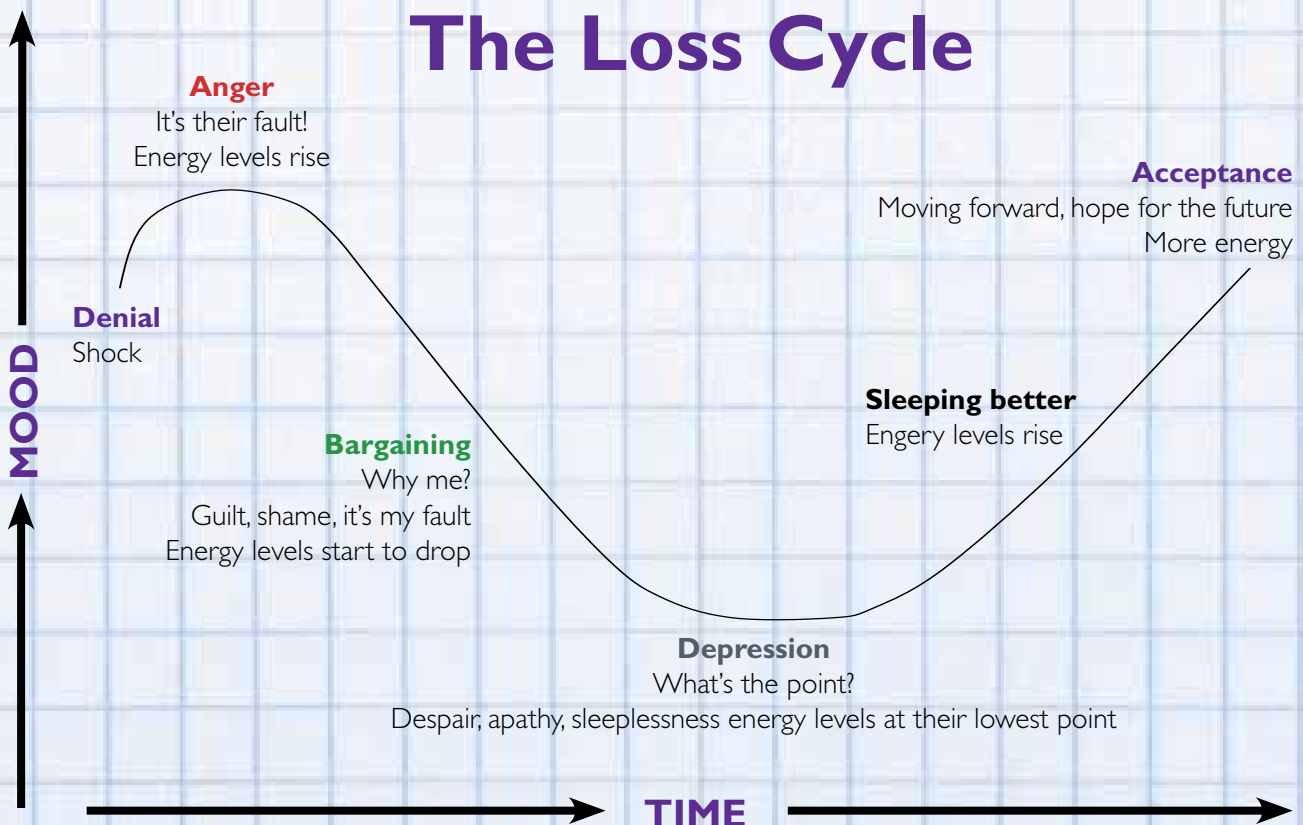
The stages of loss are:

- denial
- anger
- bargaining
- depression
- acceptance

THE STAGES OF LOSS

You will not necessarily experience the stages of loss in the order shown above and you might visit each stage more than once. You might sometimes feel that you are taking one step forward and two steps back. The feelings you might experience, whether mild or intense, are all a normal part of divorce and separation. However, if you feel that you've been stuck in a particular stage for some time, you might want to consider seeing a counsellor to help you through the process.

The Loss Cycle



Adapted from
Kubler-Ross 1969

Denial

- A feeling that it isn't happening
- Hiding things from your friends and family
- Fantasising and not dealing with reality.



Realising that your relationship has ended can leave you in a state of shock. You could become absent-minded and feel that this isn't really happening to you.

Fear of facing the future alone can be one factor that contributes to denial. Facing your fears can seem like too much to bear.

You may feel a mix of emotions and have rapid mood changes. You could swing wildly from feeling numb and not being able to talk, to feeling out of control emotionally and perhaps needing to scream and shout. You might also feel that your emotions are raw and that everyone thinks they know what's going on.

You may experience a feeling of detachment, of being in a daze, as though you are watching a movie. You could also have feelings of panic and anxiety, and a compulsion to do something. This can often take the form of throwing yourself into work or anything practical.

Anger

- Overreacting and often acting in an irrational way
- Feeling like you're out of control
- Being short-tempered and aggressive.

Anger can be explosive. You can swing from feeling hatred and revenge to feeling sad and insecure. The depth of these feelings can often be frightening.

If you have decided to leave the relationship, you might find it difficult to express your anger because you feel guilty. If you have been left, you might find it difficult to express anger for fear of pushing the other person further away.

Anger often comes before the process of letting go. Trying to redirect your anger by doing practical things can help. It isn't healthy to bottle anger up or express it aggressively. You can express anger in a healthy way by talking to friends or family, exercising or by talking to a counsellor. Keeping anger bottled up can lead to depression.

Bargaining

Thinking: Maybe we could have a second chance. If only he or she:

- would change
- knew how much I cared
- knew just what I'd done for the family.

You may find yourself wanting to strike a bargain with your ex-partner to try desperately to make things as they were before or to make the pain go away. This is not a good time to make deals. You may make impossible promises and make things even worse.





Depression

- Crying uncontrollably
- Having no interest in anything
- Feeling like you have a 'mental fog'
- Not sleeping well
- Feeling withdrawn and cut off from others.

Feelings of loneliness, sadness or depression are normal during this difficult time. The feelings of sorrow and loss of your relationship, and all that it means to you, can be difficult to bear. You might also have sleep problems and feel emotionally drained.

Because our identities are tied up in relationships, it can be difficult to imagine yourself as a whole and separate person. Your self-esteem can be low, making it difficult to do everyday things.

You might feel like crying most of the time. If the feelings of depression won't go away, or they get worse, you may need to speak to your doctor or a counsellor.

Acceptance

- Your emotions become more balanced – you can acknowledge both good and bad bits of your relationship
- You find yourself more able to manage strong emotions
- You have hope for the future.

For some people this stage can mark the beginning of a new life with new choices, for others it can be a bit of an anticlimax. Relationships between separated parents can settle down, although it is also possible that problems with children may sometimes arise.

The feelings at each stage can be overwhelming, and you might feel like you are going crazy. But though it may not seem so at the time, we know from research on the grief process that it is better to acknowledge these feelings to yourself and close friends and family, and to accept that they are a part of a painful process that will normally ease in time.

Don't expect to go through the stages one by one. It is more likely that you'll jump from one to the other, often in the space of a few minutes!

Understanding the stages won't make the pain go away, but it might help you realise that this is a normal process that other people go through as well.



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- The best thing you can do for your children is to take care of yourself. By taking steps forward for yourself you will be helping your children as well.
- Do things that are just for you – pamper yourself, visit friends, read, find time for yourself and so on.
- Eat properly and get enough sleep and exercise.
- Try to limit the emotional energy you give to the conflict.
- Express your feelings by talking to a friend or counsellor. Release the tension by exercising.
- Although separation is a painful process for parents and children, remember that things change with time.

Ask yourself 'If I'm physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted, how can I be available to care for my children?'

You have a right to your feelings. However, what you do with them can make a big difference in your child's life. It's not healthy to keep your anger inside, to express it aggressively, or to use the children to get back at your ex-partner.

Tell yourself that it's OK to feel angry or sad. You can express your feelings by talking to a friend or counsellor, by joining a support group or by exercising.

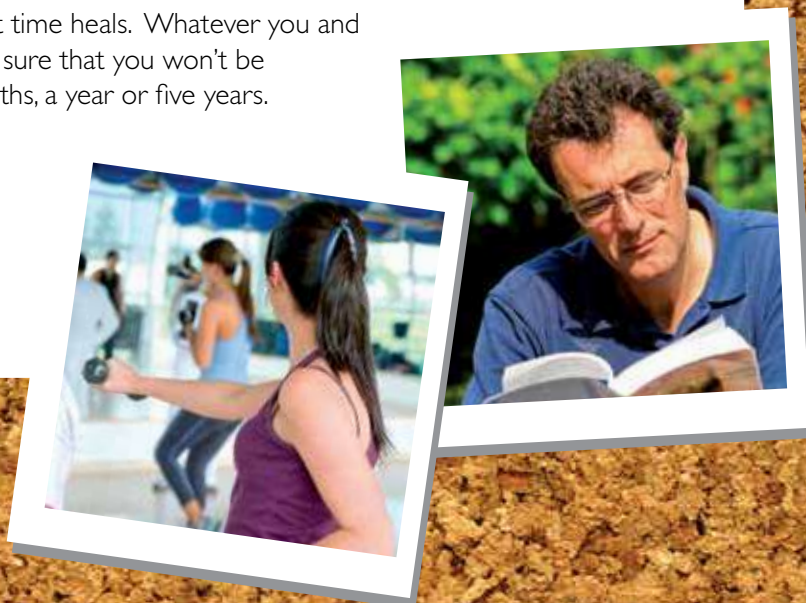
If you are the one who left, you're likely to feel guilty about the separation and to be further ahead in the separation process as you've had more time to come to terms with things. Nevertheless, as the process moves forward, you may find yourself grieving sharply and experiencing renewed anger as you may have done in the beginning. Again, the grief during the separation process is not straightforward.

If you have been left, you could feel betrayed and rejected, leaving you feeling insecure and jealous of any new relationship your ex-partner has. You might also not want to accept the end of the relationship and try to hold on to it. Sometimes conflict between ex's can be the only way that people imagine they can continue to stay connected.

Sometimes it might seem that you have a mountain to climb, but with time the mountain can turn into a small hill.

It is important to bear in mind that time heals. Whatever you and your children feel now, you can be sure that you won't be feeling the same way after six months, a year or five years.

Having a support network can really help you through any difficult patches. You could also consider seeing a counsellor or using mediation.





SUPPORT NETWORK

Name the person or people in your life who meet each of the needs listed below.

Someone I can rely on in a crisis:

Someone I can talk to if I am worried:

Someone who makes me feel good about myself:

Someone who will tell me how well or how badly I am doing:

Someone who really makes me stop and think about what I am doing:

Someone who introduces me to new ideas, new interests or new people:




EXTENDED FAMILY

Grandparents and other family members play an important part in your child's life.

Quite often, these family members also suffer the fallout when parents are in conflict and they feel that they have to take sides. Family members might feel strongly about what has happened. However, it is important to continue to allow your child to have contact with them.

Explain to your extended family that although you understand that they might have divided loyalties, it is important that they don't speak badly about either parent as this could cause children to feel that they are in the middle of an even bigger conflict.



Children benefit from the stability and sense of belonging that other family members can bring, especially at a time of instability and uncertainty. Spending time in another home where life carries on as normal can be a great comfort to them.



YOUR CHILDREN'S FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Friends and family are very important to children, and they may lose contact with the people they are closest to for a number of reasons outside of their control.

There can be many reasons for this, including moving home and people taking sides.

Fill your child's name in the centre and any friends or family that are important to them in the surrounding bits of paper. If you have more than one child you can photocopy the diagram or use different coloured ink for each child.





COUNSELLING

You might want to consider counselling if you feel that you are stuck at one of the stages of loss. Counselling can:

- help you untangle conflicting emotions
- support you through a time of change
- help you to express your feelings, and
- help children to express their feelings and feel supported.



Individual counselling

Counselling helps you to make problems clear in your own mind, and find better ways of working through them. The counsellor is trained to listen to you and help you understand and work things out for yourself. They won't tell you what to do, but will work with you to support you. Counselling sessions usually last for 50 minutes, and the number of sessions you have will depend on the issues you have. Your counsellor can discuss this with you.

Family counselling

Some people find family counselling or family therapy very useful. This type of counselling is designed for families – parents and children – but can be helpful for any relationship, within families or not, that would benefit from support. Extended families including grandparents and stepfamilies can also attend. People sometimes find it helpful to invite a very close family friend.

Family counselling can help family members find ways to support and help each other, and to develop their communication skills and their ability to settle differences. It takes place in a safe and supportive environment where the focus is on identifying and encouraging the family's strengths and resources, and where problems are worked out together.

You will probably have to pay for any individual or family counselling you have, but your GP may be able to refer you to a free service.

Youth counselling

During a divorce or separation you might find that you are not as available to your children as you might want to be. Children may then start to keep their feelings and worries to themselves, thinking that talking to you might burden and distress you further. You can ask your child's school if there is a youth counsellor on site. Youth counselling can give children an opportunity to talk about their fears and worries without the added anxiety of worrying you.



FAMILY MEDIATION

This is for people who:

- are finding it hard to talk to their ex-partner directly
- want to improve communication about their children
- don't want to go to court
- want to find a way to reduce conflict, and
- want to find a fair way to take children's views into account.

WHAT HAPPENS IN MEDIATION?

In mediation the things you can discuss include the following.

- Agreeing child arrangements – how much time your children will spend with each parent and how this will work, including the little details that can make such a big difference (such as agreeing pick-up times and where the children will eat).
- Where your children will live
- Financial support for your children
- What will happen to the family home
- How assets and debts should be divided
- How other finances, like pensions, savings and investments, will be split.

Family mediation allows you and your ex-partner to reach your own decisions rather than having a judge decide for you.

For this reason, agreements drawn up through mediation tend to work better in practice and last longer.

In family mediation you sort out family arrangements over a number of joint meetings. The focus is on providing a safe and fair environment with the aim of moving forward and reaching agreement, not on deciding whose fault it is. The mediator is not on anyone's side and will help you to negotiate an agreement that takes account of the whole family's needs.

Mediation can promote better communication between you and your ex-partner. It also helps to build a strong foundation for continued, good parenting. Mediation can be about children or property and finance, or both.

In some situations, mediation services can offer an appointment to see the children and get their views. However, the parents are still responsible for making decisions.



If you are thinking about mediation

If you are eligible you can receive legal aid for the MIAM and for any family mediation sessions you decide to take part in. If at least one parent is eligible for legal aid for mediation, the Legal Aid Agency will pay the cost of the MIAM and fund the first session of mediation after the MIAM for both parents. For more information, visit www.gov.uk/looking-after-children-divorce. Family mediation can be quicker, cheaper and easier than the stress of going to court.

If you want to use mediation to sort out arrangements for you and your children, you can find your nearest family mediation service by:

- visiting the Family Mediation Council website www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk.

When you find your nearest service, you can ask any questions you have. If you want to know more, the person you are speaking to will take your details and book an appointment for you to meet a mediator for an assessment.

At the assessment

The mediator will explain what mediation means and help you decide if it is right for you. The mediator can also check to see if you are eligible for public funding. You must take in proof of your income, such as a payslip or a bank statement.

You can choose to have a joint assessment meeting with your ex-partner or to have a separate one. If you both choose to have a joint one, you should still be seen separately for a part of the meeting.

When you start mediation

If you and your ex-partner are both thinking about mediation, you will be offered a joint meeting. This will be the first of two or three meetings you will both attend to make plans for your children.

During mediation

If you are having mediation for child issues the mediator will help you plan where your child will be spending their time. You can decide what you want to discuss and how much detail you provide. The mediator will also help you communicate better with your ex-partner about your children.



Once you and your ex-partner have both reached agreement, the mediator will write up the details for you. You may be able to have your agreement turned into a legally binding agreement called a Child Arrangements Order.



Your separated parenting journey revisited



You've looked at the different parts of you becoming a separated parent and considered it from different viewpoints. We know the effect high conflict has on children and how this part of their parents' breakdown has most potential for harm. It's now time to see which road you're on. Are you still on the same road as before or have you made some changes that have made the journey easier for you and your children?

Now look at the table on the next page again. Tick the boxes that apply to you and add up the number of ticks in each column. Give yourself half a point for any changes you would like to make but have not been able to make yet.

Try to be as honest as possible when you do it, remembering that this information is for you. Nobody will judge you and you won't have to share what you write with anyone else. When you've done this, compare the number of ticks with the number you got the first time to see if your journey is now easier. Remember that small changes can make a big difference. Even doing one thing differently will have a positive effect on your life.

Again, there are blank rows for you to write down anything you think that isn't on the list.



Your separated parenting journey revisited

WINDING ROAD	✓	STRAIGHTER ROAD	✓
High conflict		Reduced conflict	
Arguing in front of the children		Having a business-like conversation	
Behaving in a blaming way		Behaving in a co-operative way	
Not wanting to hear your children		Listening to your children	
Expecting your children to choose sides		Letting your children love both parents	
Thinking about things from your own perspective		Thinking about things from your children's perspective	
Trying to prove your ex-partner is in the wrong		Being prepared to admit your own mistakes	
Giving all of your emotional energy to the conflict		Allowing some time for yourself	
Thinking about what your ex-partner should or shouldn't do		Thinking about what you can do	
Focusing on things you can't control		Focusing on things you can control	
Going to court		I am thinking about using mediation	
Total number of ticks		Total number of ticks	

MAKING CHOICES

Now that you have come to the end of this handbook it's time to think again about the future and the choices you have. You can continue in the same way as before or decide to make some changes in your life. As you think about the future and the opportunities that lie ahead, bear in mind how you would want your children to view this stage in their lives when they are grown up. What about future events, like school plays or even weddings? Will they want their parents to still be fighting?

We've seen that it is not the divorce or separation that causes problems for children as they grow up, it is the conflict that comes out of it.

Stay the same?

If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always got.

If there is high conflict between you and your ex-partner, you could continue to argue and put your children in the middle. You could also continue to think that you are doing the best for your children and that all of the blame and fault lies with your ex-partner.

You may be used to going to court and having decisions about parenting your child being made by a judge. However, doing this doesn't deal with any emotional difficulties that can lead to further problems. It can be tempting to want to have a solicitor who is on your side, and the thought of winning a legal point can seem attractive, especially if you firmly believe that you are in the right. If you need to be proved right and think that going to court will do this, try to look at it from your children's perspective and ask yourself how this will help them in the long term.



Make some changes?

You and your ex-partner can decide to negotiate by yourselves, consult a solicitor for legal advice, or use mediation to help you both find solutions.

Focusing on the changes that you can make, rather than hoping for changes from your ex-partner, can make a huge difference to how your children experience the break-up. You can use the hints and tips in this handbook to guide you. Remember that small changes can make a big difference. There is space on the following page to write down your ideas. Taking the least confrontational approach is not necessarily easy, and you will need to be able to distance yourself from any strong emotions and take a practicalities-based, co-operative approach. Even if your ex-partner doesn't try to change, you will know that you tried to do the right thing. You might not always succeed, but by doing a little better now, there will be longer-term rewards for you and your children.





My next steps
1... 2... 3...



Further information

- **Advice Now**
Advicenow is an independent, not-for-profit website, run by the charity Law for Life. It provides accurate information on rights and the law, including Family Law, housing and benefits.
Website: www.advicenow.org.uk
- **Cafcass**
Cafcass represents children in family court cases and makes sure that the decisions made about them are in their best interests.
Website: www.cafcass.gov.uk
Phone: 0300 456 4000
- **Child Support Agency Helpline**
For information about child support.
Phone: 0345 713 3133
- **Family Lives**
For parents and the whole family.
Website: www.familylives.org.uk
Phone: 0808 800 2222
- **Family Mediators Association**
Provide mediation for couples going through divorce or separation.
Website: www.thefma.co.uk
Phone: 01355 244 594
- **Family Mediation Council**
Find your local mediator.
Website: www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk
- **Families Need Fathers**
FNF believe that children have a right to a continuing loving relationship with both parents.
Website: www.fnf.org.uk
Phone: 0300 0300 363
- **Gingerbread**
For single parents.
Website: www.gingerbread.org.uk
Phone: 0808 802 0925
- **Grandparents Plus**
For all grandparents, especially those who have lost or are losing contact with their grandchildren due to divorce or other problems.
Website: www.grandparentsplus.org.uk
Phone: 0300 033 7015
- **M.A.L.E.**
Emotional support for male victims of domestic abuse.
Website: www.mensadviceline.org.uk
Phone: 0808 801 0327
- **National Association of Child Contact Centres**
For those who need to find a contact centre.
Website: www.naccc.org.uk
Phone: 0845 4500 280
- **National Child Protection Helpline (NSPCC)**
Free confidential service for anyone concerned about children at risk.
Website: www.nspcc.org.uk
Phone: 0808 800 5000
- **National Domestic Violence Helpline**
Information and access to 24-hour emergency refuge accommodation.
Website: www.refuge.org.uk
www.womensaid.org.uk
Freephone: 0808 2000 247
- **National Family Mediation**
Family Mediation Service which offers help to couples, who are in the process of separation or divorce.
Website: www.nfm.org.uk
Phone: 0300 4000 636
- **Relate**
For counselling and other services across the UK.
Website: www.relate.org.uk
Phone: 0300 100 1234
- **Resolution**
Family Lawyers committed to the constructive resolution of family disputes.
Website: www.resolution.org.uk
Phone: 01689 820 272
- **Respect**
Information for men who are abusive to their partners, and also those who are victims of domestic abuse.
Website: www.respect.uk.net
Advice line for perpetrators: 0808 802 4040
Advice line for victims: 0808 801 0327

Further information



- **Rights of Women**
Informs, educates and empowers women about their legal rights.
Website: www.rightsofwomen.org.uk
Family law helpline: 020 7251 6577
Criminal law (sexual violence) helpline: 020 7251 8887
- **Samaritans**
24-hour confidential emotional support for anyone in a crisis.
Website: www.samaritans.org
Phone: 116 123
- **Shelter**
For housing problems.
Free 24-hour housing helpline
Website: www.shelter.org.uk
Phone: 0808 800 4444
- **Sorting Out Separation**
Helping you to make the right decisions after a break-up.
Website: www.sortingoutseparation.org.uk
- **The Parent Connection**
Hosts the programmes introduced during the SPIP, Getting it Right for children (which helps to demonstrate and develop the communication skills that co parents need) and Splitting Up? Putting Kids First (an online parenting plan, with skills help).
Website: theparentconnection.org.uk
- **Victim Support**
For support and information.
Website: www.victimsupport.org.uk
Phone: 0808 168 9111
- **Women's Aid**
Support for women who are victims of domestic abuse.
Website: www.womensaid.org.uk
Freephone: 0808 2000 247





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