



## Separation and Divorce

Children have lots of anxieties, worries, feelings and questions going around their heads when their family unit changes. This is completely natural.

What children require most in these situations is honesty, consistency, and a safe space to learn how to express how they feel.

Because many children do not even understand the questions they may have, then it can be useful to raise the questions such as, "This is what I would want to know if I was you. Do you think these questions maybe something that you want to ask?"

- Who will I live with?
- Where will I go to school?
- Will I move?
- Where will each parent live?
- Where will we spend holidays?
- Will I still get to see my friends?
- Can I still do my favourite activities?

You know your child best, be led by their response. Remember, because it is upsetting for them, that does not mean it shouldn't be talked about.

It is completely natural for them to be upset so give them permission to release their emotion by not telling them to stop crying or not to be sad.

Use encouragers instead...

- "I love you, nothing can ever change that."
- "You can talk to me, I am here for you."
- "If you need to talk to someone else, that is okay too."
- "If you talk to me about what is worrying you, I can do my best to help."
- "Even if I do not understand, know that I want to."
- "We are going to get through this together."
- "Even if I do not understand, know that I want to."

Every child and young person's experience with the loss of their known family unit will be unique, but it can sometimes cause intense emotional distress. In the immediacy of a breakup, children's early response can involve several defence behaviours, including denial, disbelief, dissociation, hyperactivity, irritability and protest, alarm, and panic.



Over time, children may experience grief and display behaviours and emotions that indicate yearning and pining, sadness and depression, anger and hostility, anxiety, guilt, shame, and despair. Even if children feel relieved at a family break up where violence is a significant factor, most children will still feel some loss and grief. There are things you can do to improve the way your child copes with the changes going on around them.

**These are things that can make a real difference:**

- Place the feelings and needs of your child above adult feelings and considerations.
- Work hard to ensure that children have good relationships and easy contact with both parents.
- Children can adjust to loss when they can rely on stability, consistent good responses, being given honest information, encouraged to ask questions, participating in family discussions, and turning to a trusted adult for comfort.
- Decide when and how to talk to the children, with both parents together as the ideal. Make sure you give an age-appropriate, and if possible, a straightforward explanation for the family break up.
- Try to shield children from overt conflict between parents - this can be frightening and make them anxious.
- Listen to your child's concerns, accept their emotions, and express your sorrow and understanding for their feelings of loss and grief.
- Look at it through their eyes – they don't want their parents to divorce, they don't want their parents to be unhappy, they will wonder what they've done wrong, they will be scared that the other parent might leave them too, they will miss the absent parent, they will want to talk about them too.
- Provide strong and constant reassurance – "It's ok to cry"; "It's not your fault". Explain that they are not responsible for what happens in an adult relationship.
- When faced with angry and challenging behaviours, provide love, understanding and good boundaries. Create opportunities to discuss their feelings and actions, define what is acceptable and what is not and work together on finding alternative and appropriate ways of dealing with angry feelings. Do not shame a child for their anger or responses, work together to find a better way.
- Do not ask your child to take sides, act as confidantes or be a go-between.
- Allow them to continue their lives and to develop and maintain their relationship with each parent.



- Fathers are the main or sole parent/carer in only 10% of families. In cases of separation/divorce, 7 out of 10 fathers have a strong presence in their children's lives. Children who fare best after divorce are those who see their fathers most often; it usually reflects a relatively harmonious relationship between parents.
- Maintain predictable and reliable arrangements, stick to familiar routines and activities, and minimise change.
- Keep up usual and familiar relationships with grandparents, other close family, and friends.
- Find good support for yourself. Seek professional advice if you or your child are still not coping after a while.

### Parental Alienation and Emotional Abuse

A parent who turns their child against their other parent by bad-mouthing, belittling the other adult, limiting contact between them, forbidding discussion about them, creating the impression the parent does not love the child and forcing the child to reject the parent is becoming increasingly common and can do significant damage to children's mental health.

The Chief Executive of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), Anthony Douglas, recommended in February 2017 that parents who use this type of 'alienation' should be considered guilty of neglect or emotional abuse.

### The Importance of Consistency

- Consistency and routine can go a long way toward providing comfort and familiarity that can help your family during this major life change. When possible, minimise unpredictable schedules, transitions, or abrupt separations.
- Especially during a divorce or separation, children will benefit from one-on-one time with each parent. No matter how inconvenient, try to accommodate your ex-partner as you figure out visitation schedules.
- It is natural that you'll be concerned about how a child is coping with this change. The best thing that you can do is trust your instincts and rely on what you know about your child. Do they seem to be acting differently than usual? Is a child doing things like regressing to younger behaviours, such



as thumb-sucking or bedwetting? Do emotions seem to be getting in the way of everyday routines, like school and social life?

- Behavioural changes are important to watch out for — any new or changing signs of moodiness; sadness; anxiety; school problems; or difficulties with friends, appetite, and sleep can be signs of a problem.
- Obviously, arguments in front of children can cause a high level of stress that is not healthy or good for the child's health. Be reassured that if this was the situation in your home then your child is now in a better situation and you can begin the healing journey.
- Keep discussions about the other parent positive, save venting when the children are away from you and do it to a trusted friend or a therapist that can keep your confidence.
- As much as possible, both parents should work to keep routines and boundaries the same in both households. Similar expectations about bedtimes, rules, and homework will reduce anxiety, especially in younger children.

Even though you can't enforce the rules in your ex-partner's home, stick to them in your home. ***Relaxing boundaries, especially during a time of change, tends to make children insecure.*** Buying things to replace love, is not in their best interests, and you could struggle to return to normal once things settle; focus on spending quality time together instead; **a child cannot get spoiled by too many hugs or comforting words.**

*Avoid rewards and punishments and focus on maintaining a strong connection with your child. Add more fun things to do with your child and have developmentally realistic expectations of them. They very often will not express gratitude or understanding for what you yourself do for them and are experiencing – this is normal. Children are developmentally very self-involved; you can model what you would like to see in them but don't punish them for being a child going through a big change. This is still true of older teenagers.*

### Explaining to the children

People divorce for lots of different reasons. Usually, parents' divorce when they have too many problems and they just cannot seem to fix them, no matter how hard they try. Sometimes anger builds and parents fight a lot or say mean things to each other. Sometimes they stop talking to each other because they are mad at each other, and sometimes they meet someone else that they fall in love with and want to live with.

Adults have their own reasons for divorce. Whatever the reasons are, one thing is for sure: *children do not cause divorce.*



Still, many children believe they are the reason their mum and dad got divorced. They think that if only they had behaved better, or helped more around the house, the divorce wouldn't have happened, this isn't true. Divorce is between mums and dads only!

Ensure your child knows – “Even if you once heard your parents argue about you, or your friend next door thinks his parents broke up because he got in trouble at school, these things don't cause a husband and wife to end their marriage. *You might feel you're to blame for your parents' divorce, but you are not the cause. And the fact that your parents decide not to stay married is not your fault.*”

#### Gingerbread

- Support for single parents in England and Wales including advice and information on child support, benefits, tax credits and your child's contact with their other parent.
- Freephone single parent helpline: 0808 802 0925

(Mon 10:00-18:00, Tues, Thurs & Fri 10:00-16:00, Wed: 10:00-13:00 and 17:00-19:00)

Edited by [www.jwbridgethegap.com](http://www.jwbridgethegap.com)

Sources:

[youngminds.org](http://youngminds.org)

[kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org)

[gingerbread.org.uk](http://gingerbread.org.uk)





## Books we Recommend

