

Dealing with Separation and Divorce



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

Did you know?

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

Positive things for parents to do when splitting up

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

This booklet offers advice on how you can:

- Listen to your children and have a better understanding of how they feel;
- Deal with problems by being honest with them, not taking sides or ignoring them;
- Help your child adjust to a new stepparent, stepbrother or stepsister;
- Claim benefits for yourself and your children.

Getting used to divorce, separating and a new family

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

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

Putting children first

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

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

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

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

Helping your child talk about their feelings

- Give your child opportunities to tell you about their feelings, even if these are not easy to hear such as how much they are missing the other parent.
- Try to see things from your child's point of view – sometimes when you've done this it becomes easier to understand their behaviour and you can help your child in dealing with it.
- Get help and support for yourself if your child is telling you difficult and upsetting things.
- Try to be honest and straightforward with your child – don't make promises you can't keep.
- Ask your child about their point of view on key decisions. They'll value being listened to.
- Your children may want to talk to someone outside their circle of family and friends. This is a mature step to take, so let them know that you understand they cannot always tell you how they feel.
- If you or your child feels they would benefit from speaking to a counsellor, see the contact list at the back of this leaflet.

Relatives matter

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

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

Negotiating with your ex-partner

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

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

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

The way you talk to and act with your ex-partner will have an effect on your children. You and your ex-partner will have to work out what is best for each of you and for your children and how to involve each other in decisions. How you manage the separation is the most important thing.

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

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

What to consider

- Decide which things you can compromise on, and which you can't.
- You may need to find some separate support to help you – a third party who is more objective. This could be a family member, a friend or an organisation (see contacts at end of this leaflet).
- Although family and friends may be willing to help, and may have useful suggestions, make sure they are able to put the needs of your children first.
- Make sure children are clear about arrangements for spending time with each parent.
- Children should not be exposed to sudden changes in arrangements unless it is unavoidable.

What to consider (contd)

- Ensure arrangements reflect your child's social and school life. Older children are likely to have their own friendships, interests and hobbies, and this needs to be taken into account when you make arrangements for them.
- If things go wrong and arrangements break down, your children may react very strongly and could get very angry with both parents. Try talking to your child and see what you can come up with together to make things easier.
- If you really find there is no scope for compromise between you and your ex-partner you have a right to apply to the court for an order - about where your child will live, how often you can see him or her and other important decisions about your child's upbringing.
- Generally, you will be referred to mediation before any court proceedings start. (Mediation will not apply if there has been domestic violence within 12 months or if any child protection issues exist).
- The court's decision will always be based on what it considers to be in your child's best interests. For further advice consult a solicitor (see contacts at end of leaflet).

Keeping children safe

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

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

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

Stepfamilies - making it work

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

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

Evidence suggests that living between two households can make a positive difference to children's sociability, flexibility, independence and resilience. For parents, sharing the care of their children can provide welcome breaks and a sense of shared responsibility.

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

Top tips

- Give children their own space. When you set up home again with a new partner it is important that all the children have some privacy and a space they can claim as their own.
- Be patient – your children will need time to get to know and trust your new partner and their children.
- Keep a fair approach to all the children – there will be arguments but try not to side with your children rather than your partner's or be over harsh with your child in an attempt to appear fair.
- Keep talking – with families joining together it is important to make time to listen to everyone's views and see if there are new ways of doing things that will keep most people happy.
- Involve older children in decisions around sharing two households; take their views into consideration when making future arrangements.
- Listen to your children even if the things they say are negative, it is important they feel heard. Seek support for yourself if you find it hard to hear the things they say.

Top tips (contd)

- Understand that your child may be unhappy sometimes – it may be a new life for you and your new partner but for the children involved it will signal an end, allow them time to grieve for the old way.
- Doing the best you can is sometimes hard work and you may need someone to help you through. All parents need support and step-parents are no exception.

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

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

- If you have a child under the age of 16 (or under 20 if they stay in approved education or training) living with you, you may be able to claim child benefit. You may also be entitled to Child Tax Credit.
- If you are working, you may be entitled to claim Working Tax Credit and may qualify for help with childcare costs.
- If you are separated, you may be able to claim child support from the parent who is not living with the child.
- Jobcentre Plus run various programmes to support lone parents in gaining work, contact your local Jobcentre Plus office for more information.
- You can get help with your pension if you are divorced.

For more information on claiming benefits for your family visit www.gov.uk/browse/benefits

For more information on Child Benefit go to www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/child or call **0300 200 3100**. For information on Tax Credits go to www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/tax-credits or call **0345 300 3900**.

You can find out more about child maintenance support (including a child maintenance calculator) at www.cmoptions.org or call **0800 988 0988**.

Further help

Families Need Fathers

Information and support on shared parenting issues

Tel: 0300 0300 363

www.fnf.org.uk

Gingerbread

Freephone advice service for lone parent families

Tel: 0808 802 0925

www.gingerbread.org.uk

Family Lives

Information on various parenting issues including workshops and courses

Tel: 0808 800 2222

www.familylives.org.uk

Relate

Relationship counselling and life skills courses

Tel: 0300 100 1234

www.relate.org.uk

National Association of Child Contact Centres

Promotes safe child contact within a network of child contact centres

Tel: 0845 4500 280

www.naccc.org.uk

Action for Children

Support for families going through separation and divorce

www.actionforchildren.org.uk

Child Maintenance Options (CMO)

Free information and support for parents applying for help with maintenance payments

Tel: 0800 988 0988

www.cmoptions.org

Child Maintenance Service (CMS)

Parents must speak to CMO first. If they can't come to an arrangement, their case will be passed onto CMS.

National Family Mediation

Family mediation services

Tel: 0300 4000 636

www.nfm.org.uk

Coventry & Warwickshire Family Mediation

Tel: 024 7663 3434

www.cwfm.org.uk

Government advice on divorce / separation

www.gov.uk/browse/births-deaths-marriages/marriage-divorce

ChildLine

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

Tel: 0800 1111

www.childline.org.uk

Triple P - Positive Parenting Program

Providing solutions for dealing with parenting problems
www.triplep-parenting.uk.net

For parenting programmes in Warwickshire
Tel: 01926 743062
www.warwickshire.gov.uk/parentingprogrammes

National Domestic Violence Helpline

Free 24-hour helpline for women experiencing physical, emotional or sexual violence in the home
Tel: 0808 200 0247
www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

Warwickshire Against Domestic Abuse

Tel: 0800 408 1552
www.talk2someone.org.uk

The Law Society England and Wales

Provides information to help you find the legal support you need and has a selection of on line guides to common legal issues.
Runs a 'Find a Solicitor' search function as well as the Family Law Accreditation Scheme.
www.lawsociety.org.uk

Counselling Services for Children

Relate – Children and Young People's Counselling

Tel: 0300 100 1234
www.relate.org.uk

Acorn Centre (Nuneaton)

Tel: 024 7638 1878
www.acorncentrenuneaton.co.uk

North Warwickshire Counselling Service (Nuneaton)

Tel: 024 7632 0095
www.nwcounselling.org.uk

Sycamore Counselling Service (Nuneaton)

Tel: 024 7674 4544
www.sycamorecounselling.org.uk

Relate Coventry & Warwickshire

Tel: 02476 225 863
www.relatecoventry.org

Other titles in this series include:

Choosing Childcare and Early Education
Dealing with Bullying - A Parent's Guide
Dealing with Discrimination
Talking to your child about Relationships & Sex
Talking to your child about Alcohol & Drugs
Encouraging Good Behaviour
Life with a Teenager
Moving on to Secondary School
New Baby?
Starting School
Surfing Safely - Your Family's Guide to Internet Safety
Tackling Homework and Revision
Why Dads Matter
Your Child's Learning - Getting Involved

FIS Factsheets on a range of issues also available for download at:
www.warwickshire.gov.uk/fis



Contacting the Family Information Service

If you are looking for any further information or advice for your family, we can help you. We offer a free and impartial information and signposting service for the parents and carers of children and young people on a wide range of topics including: childcare, benefits, health, bullying, disability support, leisure activities and much, much more. If you don't know who to ask, ask the Family Information Service!

Opening Hours:

Monday to Thursday - 9.00am-5.30pm

Friday - 9.00am-5.00pm

Phone us:

0845 090 8044 (local Rate) or 01926 742274

(Voicemail for out of office hours)

Email us:

fis@warwickshire.gov.uk

Visit our website:

www.warwickshire.gov.uk/fis

Write to us:

Family Information Service

Saltisford Office Park, Ansell Way, Warwick CV34 4UL

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**Warwickshire Family
Information Service**

