

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

www.parentline.org.au



Children and Separation

REMEMBER:

- *Prepare children as best as you can. Give them a simple explanation of why you are separating.*
- *Let your children know that both parents love them very much.*
- *Remind children that it is not their fault – it is a decision that you as parents are making about your relationship.*
- *Focus on the positives. Give lots of love and attention*
- *Try to avoid conflict in front of your children, and avoid blame.*
- *Try to minimise the change to your children's environment and routine.*
- *Acknowledge how your children are feeling, and that these feelings are okay.*

Separation is a difficult time for everyone in the family.

A decision to separate is one of the hardest choices you may ever make, and it has consequences for everyone in your family. Both you and your children may feel confused about what is happening, and be unsettled about the impact of such change.

Separation can evoke strong feelings for everyone – you, your partner, your children, and even extended family members like grandparents, aunts and uncles. Your family is undergoing significant change - separation usually means that the family is dividing, and that one parent will be leaving the household.

With change comes emotion. You may feel sad or lonely, angry, guilty, or like you have failed in some way. Many parents have experiences of depression and anxiety. In fact, you may feel all these emotions at different times.

It is important to remember that your child also has strong feelings. They may feel grief, shock, insecurity and worry whether the remaining parent will leave them as well. Some may feel that they are to blame for the situation, while others may feel angry.

As a parent it's important to understand that your children are also going through a distressing time, and to do what you can to reduce the impact on them.

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QUESTIONS YOUR CHILD MAY HAVE

Why are mum and dad splitting up? Is it about me?

Help your child to understand that sometimes parents want different things, just like sometimes you and your child want different things. It is important to assure them that this is a decision you are making as parents. It is not about your child, or loving them any less.

My mum (or dad) is moving out. I'm worried that I've done something wrong.

Children may often feel they are the cause of arguments or the separation itself. Reassure your child that it is not their fault, and they should not feel guilty in any way. Whilst parents may experience conflict and blame, it is important not to convey this to your children.

Where am I going to live? Will I be able to stay at my school? What about my friends?

It is important for parents to be honest with children about what is happening, the decisions being made, and what it means for them. This includes where they will live, when they will see the other parent, and any other living arrangements. Children often have lots of questions about what separation means for them, so it's important that you as parents have given thought to these details. If your child is old enough to voice an opinion about what they want, make sure you let them feel heard and validate their feelings. If it's something that can't happen, be clear about this, and don't make promises you can't keep.

Will I still be able to see my dad (or mum)?

It is important to recognise that children need to know that both their parents still love them, and will continue to do so. They need the ongoing love and affection from both parents, as well as support and encouragement as they grow up. To do this, parents need to maintain a level of contact and communication that may seem very difficult right now.

Your child may be wondering whether they will still be able to see the other parent, when, where and how. It is important to be thinking about this straight away, as it will be one of the first questions your child asks. It is a good idea to have a plan in place for interim contact.

DECISIONS ABOUT A CHILD'S CARE

Often the best decisions about a child's care are those made by both parents together. However, when parents are separating it can be very difficult to make such decisions without assistance.

Children, especially young children, are not usually able to fully comprehend the responsibility of deciding about who they want to live with. They may have ideas and wishes, but understanding the long-term consequences of this will be difficult for them. It is also a heavy burden to place this decision on children, as choosing between parents can lead them to feeling guilty and worried.

The Family Court does consider children's wishes when they are primary-school aged or older. The Family Relationships Program is also designed to assist families make such decisions outside of Court

Family Relationships Services

Family Relationships Services are an initiative of the federal government designed to support children and families through separation. They provide information about:

- Education and Skills Training
- Counselling
- Family Dispute Resolution
- Children's Contact Services
- Parenting Orders Program
- Post Separation Cooperative Parenting
- Supporting Children After Separation Program
- Other Family Relationship Services
- Family Relationship Advice Line

For more information about this service visit: www.familyrelationships.gov.au or call the Advice Line on: 1800 050 321.

Parenting Plans

A parenting plan is an agreement detailing parenting arrangements for children. It must be recognised by a Court, but is worked out between parents.

Parenting plans set out each person's responsibilities, including:

- where children are to live
- the amount of time children spend with each parent and other people
- how parental responsibility is to be shared by each parent
- communication between the children and other people
- special arrangements such as holidays
- resolution of difficulties

Contact Arrangements

Contact with the parent who is not the child's primary carer should be regular and predictable. The aim of contact is to maintain positive relationships, and it serves to reassure children that they are loved by both parents.

It is important to keep contact arrangements, and let the other parent know if you are unable to attend, or if you need to vary the plans. Children may feel rejected if you don't arrive as expected. Keeping in touch also helps to avoid conflict with the other parent, which benefits children.

Sometimes children may come home from a contact visit and be irritable, withdrawn, or oppositional. Because children are upset after spending time with a parent does not mean they have had a bad time or have been neglected. Contact may bring up feelings of sadness or painful memories, or a wish for parents to reunite. Saying goodbye can also be hard too.

Do not use contact visits as a way of "checking on" the other parent. Children should not be put in a position where they feel caught between parents, or where their loyalties are being tested.

Contact is a child's opportunity to continue their relationship with the parent they don't live with, and should be encouraged as a positive activity.

As much as possible, try to reach agreement with the other parent about rules and discipline, as it is best if there is consistency between households. If there are some differences, help children to understand the different rules and when they apply.

Child Support

Child support is the transfer of payment between separated parents for the benefit of children. Usually this involves non-custodial parents providing child support to the parent that the child lives with.

Child support payments can be arranged independently between parents, without the involvement of Courts or other bodies. You can also make a child support agreement, and ask the Child Support Agency to accept it.

The Child Support Agency (CSA) can also help you to calculate an amount of child support, and arrange payments when parents can't do this themselves. They also offer community information, appointments, and referrals to qualified services.

Visit: www.csa.gov.au or call CSA on 131 272 for more information.

WHERE TO NEXT?

In many situations, parents continue to experience conflict after they have separated. These arguments may be open and distressing, or they may be subtle, with constant "put downs" or manipulations. When this happens, children can be placed in a difficult situation, watching both parents they love upsetting each other. It is important to try to minimise such conflicts in the best interests of your children.

The Family Relationships Service helps with dispute resolution and cooperative parenting. Services such as CatholicCare, Relationships Australia, Interrelate, or your local Community Health Centre can also assist. The Attorney General's Department also has information and brochures to download (www.ag.gov.au).

Useful Numbers:

Parent Line: 1300 1300 52

Family Relationships Advice Line: 1800 050 321

Child Support Agency: 131 272