



"Massive Minds, Huge Hearts, Guided by God"

Family Break-up

When a family breaks up it is hard for everyone, especially children. Parents need to move from being a couple to being partners in parenting. How they handle this and deal with any conflict has a big impact on how children cope.

Children need the love and support of both parents as they adjust to the changes. It is important that they feel safe and secure.

Breaking up

Parents can feel many emotions when a relationship ends. They might feel:

- shock and confusion – it can be hard to believe it is really happening
- angry with their partner, themselves or others
- upset at the loss of the family unit
- fear of the future, or of parenting alone
- relief if there has been a lot of stress, or violence
- hopeful or excited about a new future
- worry that children will want to be with the other parent more than them.

Children can be surprised and confused when parents break up, even if there has been lots of fighting. They may feel:

- angry, sad and insecure
- abandoned or rejected by the parent who leaves
- unsure about whether it is OK to love the parent who leaves, and worried about how they are coping
- afraid that if one parent leaves the other may go too
- guilty or worry that the break-up is their fault.

How children react

How children react depends on their age, development and temperament.

Young children may not have the words to say how they feel, and can show it in the way they behave. Some may:

- change sleeping or eating habits
- be clingy, aggressive or 'naughty'
- act younger, for example start to wet again after being toilet-trained.

School-aged children are more able to talk about their feelings but may also act them out.

They might:

- try to be really good, thinking this will make everything OK
- withdraw or have trouble focussing
- 'misbehave' at home or at school.

Children often don't adjust to the new situation all at once. They may seem OK for a while and then show signs of not coping. Adolescents need time and space to work out how they feel. It can add stress at a time when they are dealing with their own rapid physical and emotional changes. They are becoming more independent but still need structure and routine, and the security of their family.

It can be easy to think that children and young people are doing OK if they don't talk about the break-up. Some might not want to tell you how they feel in case you get angry or upset.

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Children's feelings about the breakup can be just as strong as parents' feelings.

Fighting and tension between parents causes children the most stress in a break up. It helps to keep the focus on the children, not problems in the relationship.
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Helping children to cope

It is not easy to make the change to a new family set-up and living arrangements. It takes time and children will need your support as they settle into their new life. It will help children to cope if you explain in ways they can understand. Answer their questions and listen to their feelings.

Tell children:

- you are both still their parents and you both love them. Make it clear they don't have to choose between you
- they will still see the parent they don't live with
- they can't change things or bring you back together
- you will listen to what they want, but adults make the big decisions.

Don't ask younger children to decide things such as who they want to live with. This puts a lot of pressure on them and forces them to choose between their parents. As children mature, they can have more say in decisions that affect them.

It is important not to burden children with adult problems or to look to them for emotional support. Give children a sense that you are in control, even if you don't feel it at times. Let them know you are OK even when you seem upset, and that you expect things to get better.

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It's best not to speak badly about the other parent in front of children. This really hurts them.
They are very loyal and love you both.

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It can also help children to cope if you:

- keep things as predictable and consistent as you can, for example keep to usual routines with schools, friends, sports, clubs
- make sure they have regular contact with the other parent (if this is safe). It might include visits, phone calls or messaging, or online contact. Having photos can help too
- keep children in touch with grandparents and other relatives. Their support will help them feel secure
- let teachers or childcare workers know what's happening so they can support your child
- work out how both parents can attend things like school events and sports
- introduce a new partner slowly, especially if children are still sad about the loss of their family
- encourage children to talk with someone they trust who is not part of what is happening.

Spending time in 2 homes

When children are spending time in two homes, it is important that they feel they belong in both. Having a space that is theirs and somewhere to put their things can help.

Children can adjust to different rules and parenting styles in two homes. It helps if parents don't undermine each other and can agree on important things like bedtimes and use of technology. Sometimes you may have to accept that you do things differently.

Try to make handover times stress-free. It can help to be on time and reliable, and flexible with arrangements when needed.

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When children spend time in two homes, it is important that they feel they belong in both.

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Parenting plans

Some parents make a verbal agreement about the care of their children. For other parents, it can work better and avoid confusion if things are written down in a plan. If you can't agree or you feel unsafe trying to work things out, you could ask CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services) to help you work out a parenting plan.

A parenting plan should be based on what is best for each child in their unique situation. It needs to be as clear as possible to avoid conflict, and flexible enough to meet the changing needs of children and parents. It can help to include how you will work things out if you disagree about something.

It is important for a parenting plan to include:

- where children will live
- how and when they will spend time with the other parent
- how and when they will spend time with other important people
- what will happen for holidays and special occasions
- how you will take care of their schooling, health care, emotional wellbeing, cultural and religious needs.

When you work out a parenting plan together you can change it at any time if you both agree. However, no-one can make either parent stick to it.

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Parenting plans need to focus on what is best for your children.
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Conflict and children

Conflict or violence in the family has a big impact on babies, children and young people whether they see and hear the violence, or not. When a parent is hurt verbally, emotionally or physically, children may:

- become anxious, have delayed development or learning problems
- have stress symptoms such as eating or sleep problems
- feel forced to choose between their parents
- feel that they need to protect a parent.

It is important that parents resolve issues and avoid tension and conflict. Even if you can't agree, try to be calm and polite towards each other.

Getting help

Seek help if you are finding it hard to deal with the break-up. The better you cope, the better you are able to help your children. It is very important to get help if there is violence in your home, or you have trouble managing your anger. Talking with your doctor is a good place to start. Counsellors can help you work out how best to help your children. It might help to get counselling for your children so they have someone independent to talk to.

You can get further advice and information from:

- School

- Your GP
- <https://parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk/article/co-parenting-after-a-separation-or-divorce>
- <https://parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk/article/i-m-going-through-a-break-up-and-want-to-support-my-child>
- <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/>
- <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/>
- <https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-separation-and-divorce>
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/separation-and-divorce/>
- <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/a-z-guide/divorce/>
- <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/information/separating/>

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