

A guide for grown ups

As a parent, you can have a profound impact on how well your child adapts to a separation or divorce.

Reaching out for help – seeking resources and advice for your family during separation or divorce – is one of the most supportive things you can do for your child at this time.

Separation or divorce can be a challenging time for you and your child. Some important things you can do throughout your separation or divorce are:

- ◆ **Separate your feelings** about the separation or divorce from your parental responsibilities.
- ◆ **Understand your child's need** to have a relationship with the other parent (depending on your situation).
- ◆ Keep your child out of the conflict.
- ◆ Handle issues with **sensitivity**.
- ◆ **Ensure your child knows they're not to blame** for the separation or divorce and you still love them and always will.

You should read through the information as it provides an insight into how kids (eight to 12 years) might view their parents' break-up. The CD-ROM aims to reassure your child they're not alone, what they're thinking or feeling is ok and the separation is not their fault. The content covers the questions your child might have about the separation or divorce, the feelings your child might have, the changes they may experience or the legal matters they may hear you and the other parent talking about.

The CD-ROM will help your child to understand what is happening, and help them find ways to cope and let them know where they can go for help. Most importantly, the CD-ROM encourages children to talk to someone they trust such as their parents, other family members, teachers, school counsellors, an Elder, or someone at their place of worship, about what they're experiencing.

Understanding more about how kids feel about separation and divorce will help you focus on handling their concerns with sensitivity, love, and support. Ideally, both you and the other parent will commit to focusing on the child's welfare during the separation or divorce. However, it may be left to one parent to help guide their family throughout this process. Your child will benefit from your commitment to helping them cope with their feelings, accepting the situation and adapting to the changes.

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Telling your child

One of the most difficult steps for parents when they decide to separate or divorce is telling their child. Parents often put off telling their child because they're not sure how to break the news. It's important to be honest with your child once you and the other parent have decided to separate or divorce. How you handle this crucial step will have a great impact on how your child adapts to this major change in their lives.

Here are some helpful tips about telling your child about your separation:

- ◆ Try to **come to an agreement with the other parent** about how and when you will tell your child and that you will both be there when you tell your child.
 - ◆ **Plan the discussion** such as how to approach your child and how you will answer their questions.
 - ◆ **Choose an appropriate time to tell your child** and make sure you have time to answer their questions.
 - ◆ Tell your child in a place they feel safe.
 - ◆ Remember **your child will look to you for guidance** – their reaction will be affected by how you tell them.
 - ◆ Try to **give your child simple reasons** for why you have decided to separate or divorce. If the reasons for your separation or divorce are intensely personal or potentially traumatic for your child, you don't have to share these. Instead, explain that the problems in the relationship are adult problems between you and the other parent.
 - ◆ If there is open hostility between you and the other parent, it's probably best for only one of you to tell your child about what's going on.
- ◆ Regardless of whether you tell your child together or separately, emphasise that the two of you are ending your adult relationship, but you will always be loving and supportive parents.

Being told that your parents have decided to separate or divorce is an upsetting and traumatic experience for any child. When telling your child, it's important you:

- ◆ **Reassure your child it's not their fault** and they're not the reason why you're separating or divorcing
- ◆ Reassure your child **they're not alone** – thousands of kids get through their parents' separation or divorce and they will too
- ◆ Reassure your child that **parents separate from each other, not their children**
- ◆ Reassure your child you and **the other parent will be their parents forever** and both of you will always love your child
- ◆ Reassure your child you will **try and answer their questions** as best you can and you will listen to what they have to say about their thoughts and feelings
- ◆ **Tell your child it's okay if they want to talk to someone else** and where they can go for help and information.

...this crucial step will have a great impact on how your child adapts...



Answering your child's questions

The break-up of a family is confusing and upsetting for a child and their first question is often, "Why?" If left unanswered, this question can create a lot of worry and anxiety in children. If your child is left to wonder why you and the other parent are splitting up, they may start to blame themselves and think they did something wrong.

Telling your child the reason(s) for the separation or divorce is, of course, up to you and the other parent. Many factors must be taken into consideration, including their age, maturity, level of understanding, and the sensitivity of the issues at hand. At the very least, however, your child should be told that they had nothing to do with the separation.

Here are some general tips for handling your child's questions:

- ◆ **Think before you speak;** take a few moments to consider your child's question before you respond.
- ◆ **Try to use age-appropriate language** and keep your answers simple; too much information will confuse your child and too many details may make them more upset.
- ◆ **Be honest** if you don't have all the answers and then explain that you'll let them know as soon as you can. Make sure you follow through with this promise.
- ◆ **Be careful not to lay blame on or disrespect the other parent,** no matter what the circumstances are.
- ◆ **Be prepared for your child's reaction and acknowledge their feelings** – they may be sad, confused or even happy or relieved.

- ◆ **Be patient and understanding** if your child asks many questions and you're not able to answer them at that time.

Children will want to know what will happen when their parents' separate or divorce and, most importantly, who will take care of them. Listen carefully to your child, treat their questions seriously and answer their questions as honestly and openly as you can. Some of the questions your child may ask you include:

- ◆ Do we have to move?
- ◆ Who will I live with?
- ◆ Will I have to change schools?
- ◆ Where will I go for holidays and times like my birthday?
- ◆ How often will I see dad/mum?
- ◆ Will I still see my grandparents, aunt, uncle, cousins, etc?

Your child will want to be reassured their needs will be met – that someone will be there to help them with their homework, drive them to their school/social activities and cook dinner for them. Be patient. It may take some time for your child to understand what you tell them. You may think your child has understood what you have said to them but they may not be listening because they're "stuck" on something you or the other parent said during an earlier discussion. Don't be surprised if they bring up something you talked about a while ago.

Make opportunities to talk to your child and encourage your child to talk to you. Try not to make all your conversations about your separation or divorce, as your child may start to avoid talking to you altogether. Always give your child your full attention when they ask you questions or talk to you and treat their comments or questions seriously. Let your child know it's ok for them to ask questions but sometimes you may not know the answer. If you're concerned that your child has become increasingly withdrawn or hostile and is not willing to communicate with you since they were told about the separation or divorce, talk to your family doctor. You can also call **Parentline** in your state or territory (telephone numbers are listed in the 'Support services' fact sheet) or visit www.kidshelponline.com.au/grownups for more information.

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Feelings

Your child will have a range of feelings during and after your separation or divorce. Some of these feelings will be quite intense and others quite subtle. At different times, your child may feel:

- ◆ sadness,
- ◆ confusion,
- ◆ guilt,
- ◆ anger,
- ◆ anxiety,
- ◆ relief,
- ◆ fear,
- ◆ embarrassment, or
- ◆ happiness.

Your child's feelings are normal and you should encourage them to express how they feel in a positive way. Let your child know they can talk about their feelings as often as they would like with you, their brothers or sisters, other family members, or friends. Your child can also try talking to an impartial person they trust like a teacher, school counsellor, an Elder, or someone at your place of worship.

If your child doesn't want to talk to anyone face-to-face, let them know they can call **Kids Helpline** on **1800 551 800** at any time. It's a free and confidential telephone counselling service for young people aged five to 25 years. Your child can speak to a qualified counsellor, who has experience in helping other children affected by separation or divorce.

You can also suggest your child writes about their feelings and experiences in a diary as this can help them feel better. Encourage your child to play sport or do something physical, or try creative activities, as these can help to make them feel better and take their mind off things for a while. Crying also provides a good release for feelings. Let your child know there is nothing wrong with crying and there is also nothing wrong with not crying.

When your child knows they're in an environment in which they can express their feelings, it will be easier for them to discuss problems and worries with you in a healthy way. Sometimes this can lead to problem solving. Sometimes the underlying situation can't be changed and you must simply help them recognise and work through their feelings. Either way, your support and encouragement will be appreciated.

Recognise your child may demonstrate behaviours appropriate for their age, i.e. your teenager may be moody or quiet and not feel like talking to you. That's ok. Just let them know that you're there to listen whenever they want or are ready to.

You should seek professional help if your child has strong feelings that last for a long time and they're not behaving the way they normally would. And, if you're feeling depressed, having trouble managing your anger, feeling extremely anxious, thinking about hurting yourself or just feel out of control, it's important you seek help too. You can call **Lifeline** on **131 114** at any time, and speak to a counsellor, who will listen, support and assist to clarify your choices and options available. A Lifeline counsellor may also provide you with information about useful services in your community.

It can be upsetting for your child to see you cry or know you're upset. So it's important you talk to someone about how you feel and what you're thinking and not keep it all inside. Your child will feel reassured if they see you in control and coping with the situation. If you cry in front of your child too often, they may start to feel they have to take care of you and make you feel better. It's not your child's responsibility to make you feel better. This is not to say that you shouldn't cry – just try and find time and place where you can cry away from your child.

Let your child know they can talk about their feelings as often as they would like...



Changes

Your family will experience lifestyle and routine changes during and after your separation or divorce. While dealing with the many changes, try to remember two important things that will never change.

- ◆ You, your child, and your former partner are still a family, just a different kind i.e. separation doesn't mean you or your child loses your family.
- ◆ You and the other parent are ending your adult relationship but will always love and care for your child i.e. separation doesn't mean your child loses a parent.

You should regularly tell, and remind, your child of these two things as this reassurance may help them adjust to the many changes. During times of change, you should also reassure your child that they're still the same person they always were. Even though things are changing, it's important they continue to see their friends and do the activities they enjoy.

Living arrangements

One of the major changes you and your child will experience is new living arrangements. Try to share as much as you can with your child about what the new living arrangements will be. Sometimes a child may have two homes and live part of their time with each parent.

It's important to ensure your child feels at home in both places. If you can, buy your child two sets of essentials such as toothbrushes and other grooming items so your child has them at both homes. Encourage your child to take their favourite or essential things to and from each house. You can help them write a list so they don't forget anything. If your child lives out of a suitcase, they may begin to feel they're just visiting, rather than living in a second home.

It's also important to ensure your child has their own 'space' at each parent's house – a place where they can go to do their homework or just be by themselves.

...reassure your child that you and the other parent will love them forever...

Sometimes, a child will spend more time with one parent than the other and they will almost certainly miss the absent parent. Children need a loving relationship with both parents. It's a good routine for your child to talk to the other parent every day or often as they can. You can reassure your child that you and the other parent will love them now and forever with phone calls, letters, cards, photographs and emails. One of the most loving things you can do for your child is to support their relationship with the other parent.

Finances

Your financial situation will also change during and after your separation or divorce. As you and the other parent will no longer be living together, it's likely you and the other parent will have less money. Explain this to your child but let them know you can still have fun by starting some new low-cost traditions like a Friday night picnic instead of Friday night pizza.

You can get free and confidential advice from a financial counsellor if you need help or advice about managing your finances. The Government's **Understanding Money** website has tips and hints on how to take control of your finances including making a budget, setting financial goals and how to start a savings plan. Visit www.understandingmoney.gov.au

Centrelink Financial Information Service officers can show you how to make informed financial decisions and help you to understand the effects of those decisions. They'll provide information over the telephone, at personal interviews or through financial education seminars. Fact sheets about Centrelink's Financial Information Service are available at www.centrelink.gov.au or call **132 300** for more information.

The **Commonwealth Financial Counselling Directory (CFC)** is a list of organisations funded by the Australian Government to provide financial counselling services. The list is available at www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/progserv under 'Commonwealth Financial Counselling (CFC)'.

The **Wesley Credit Help Line** offers confidential counselling to vulnerable and disadvantaged people facing financial crisis. It offers assistance and self-help towards achieving financial independence. Call **1800 808 488**, Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4.30pm, for immediate assistance.

The St Vincent de Paul Society offers a **Budget Counselling Training Program** to assist people to use improved budgeting strategies and develop practical living in a way of re-establishing their self-respect and independence. For more information visit www.vinnies.org.au/budget-counselling-national

The **Lifeline Service Finder** can put you in touch with a free financial counselling service. Visit www2.lifeline.org.au/service_finder/

The Child Support Agency's (CSA) **Me and my Money** booklet offers tips and hints on how to budget your money after your separation. You can view the booklet online or order a copy from the CSA website at www.csa.gov.au/publications/1143.aspx



Other changes

You may need your child to start doing more chores around the house as you will no longer have the other parent to share the household chores with. Explain to your child that with only one adult in the home, you will probably ask them to help more often.

If you and the other parent have different rules at each house, make sure you explain them to your child and the reasons for them. Try to involve your child when developing the rules at each house as this may help them to feel important and make them feel more at home at each house. Putting a list up of the rules on the fridge at each house may help your child to remember them.

How you and your child celebrate birthdays or other special occasions will probably change after the separation or divorce. These times can still be special for you and your child. You may do something with your child to celebrate their birthday and then they may do something different with the other parent. It's good to try new things, as you may find things you can do again with your child in future years.

You may start a new relationship or make new friends after your separation or divorce. Your child may find this hard to accept because they don't want to share you with anyone else. It's normal for your child to feel that way but it's important you reassure them you'll always love them and they'll never be replaced by anyone.

Over time, you may decide to start a new family with a new partner, who might have kids of their own, or you may have children with your new partner. You should talk to your child about the new family situation and give them an opportunity to tell you how they're feeling, i.e. they may feel sad, jealous, angry, confused or unsure of where they fit into the new family. Everybody will need time to adjust to the new family situation and feel like they belong.

Some positive changes

Your child may also experience some positive changes. They may be relieved or happy that there is less tension or fighting between you and the other parent. By spending more time alone with each parent, your child may get to know each of you better and develop stronger relationships with both of you. You and the other parent might even be happier and more fun to be with.

...If you and the other parent have different rules at each house... explain them to your child and the reasons for them.



Helping your child deal with the changes

You can help your child deal with the many changes they'll experience during the separation or divorce by:

- ◆ Identifying the changes ahead of time and discussing them honestly.
- ◆ Providing opportunities for your child to have a say in planning for some of the changes.

By anticipating and discussing changes that may occur in the future, you'll be helping your child adjust to the changes. If your child is left to face the unknown, their imagination can create all kinds of worst-case scenarios and worries. Many of the changes brought about by divorce and separation are out of your child's control. Anything you can do to help your child not feel powerless will make it easier for them. When possible, let your child have some input and choice. For example, if there are two or three choices of visitation schedules that could work for both parents, ask your child which schedule they think is best and why.

Try not to place too much pressure on your child to make decisions they may feel are too hard for them. Your child may start to feel they have to take sides and choose between you and the other parent.

Wherever possible, your child should continue to attend routine activities such as sports, lessons, and playing with friends. It's also more important than ever to be reliable and dependable. Keep any promises you make to your child, and be careful not to make promises that you will not be able to carry out. Remember, your unconditional love and patience will help get them through this transition.

And, just as your child needs to look after their health and continue their routines try not to neglect yourself. Make sure you do activities that help you deal with stress, such as exercising or going for coffee with friends. You need to make sure you're ok before you can look after someone else.

...If your child is left to face the unknown, their imagination can create all kinds of worst-case scenarios and worries.



The law

You may need to seek the involvement of the courts and family lawyers if you're not able to work out the details of your separation with the other parent. Be mindful and sensitive when referring to legal matters surrounding the separation or divorce in front of your child.

Hearing you and the other parent talking about custody and access, separation agreements, mediation, divorce, courts and the law can be frightening and confusing for your child, and make the inevitability of the break-up become more realistic. Be understanding of your child's fears and answer their questions in a caring and supportive way.

Explaining what certain words mean (such as divorce, mediation or custody) and about the legal process surrounding separation or divorce will help your child to understand that the laws are in place to protect the rights of both parents and children.

You may find the laws surrounding separation and divorce intimidating too. Try and find out as much as you can about the legal process and then explain it to your child as simply as possible. Answer any questions your child may have honestly and simply, and tell them if you don't know the answer.

Visit the Family Court web site at www.familycourt.gov.au to learn more about the legal processes involved following separation or divorce.

Legal services

You should get independent legal advice about your situation to protect your safety, help you make informed decisions, and ensure you fully understand the implications of anything you agree to or sign regarding your children or your finances.

The **Family Relationships Advice Line (1800 050 321)** will be able to provide you with information about the family law system. It's available 8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday, and 10am to 4pm on Saturday (local time), except public holidays.

Community Legal Centres are independent, non-profit community organisations providing free legal services, referral, advice and assistance to more than 350,000 people each year. More information is available from www.naclc.org.au or call **(02) 9264 9595**.

The **Family Law Section** of the Law Council of Australia will provide you with information about property dispute, child support, family lawyers, separation and divorce, and parenting orders. Visit www.familylawsection.org.au or call **(02) 6246 3788**.

Women's Legal Services provides free legal information to assist women in understanding and protecting their legal rights. The service aims to assist people to make informed choices and decisions about the options available to them. To find your nearest service call **(02) 6246 3788** or visit www.nwjc.org.au/wlcaddress.html

Legal Aid can provide you with one-off free legal advice which is not means tested. You don't need to apply for a grant of legal aid to get free advice. Because Legal Aid is state-based it may have different rules relating to the level of support offered depending which state you're in. Legal Aid can still provide you with assistance even if they're representing your partner. Some Legal Aid offices run divorce classes and free workshops and seminars on a range of family law matters. Visit www.nla.aust.net.au for more information and details about your nearest Legal Aid office.

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Community and Support services

There are many helpful support services that can provide you with more information if you're going through a separation or divorce. You don't have to go through it alone. You may find it helpful to talk to friends and family as you transition to your new family life. Your child will also find it helpful to talk to other people about how they're feeling and what they're thinking. There are many trained professionals and volunteers who can offer assistance to you and your child.

The **Family Relationship Advice Line (1800 050 321)** helps people affected by relationship or separation issues. It provides confidential information on family relationship issues and advice on parenting arrangements after separation. It can also refer you to services providing assistance in your local area.

Family Relationships Online provides information about services to assist with managing relationship issues, including agreeing on appropriate arrangements for children after parents separate. It also includes free resources, fact sheets and links for separated parents and can advise you of services in your local area. Visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au for more information.

Family Relationship Centres provide information, mediation, family dispute resolution and confidential advice for families throughout Australia. All the centres have facilities for children as well as free internet access to help you find more information online. Many of the services are free or are offered on a sliding cost scale, according to your level of income. For more information or to find your nearest Family Relationship Centre visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Visit the **Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA)** website, to find services that work to support and strengthen families in your local area. The FRSA's member organisations deliver professional, quality assured family and relationship services across Australia through more than 400 outlets. Go to www.frsa.org.au for more information.

beyondblue is a national initiative to raise community awareness of depression and the resources available to support people who suffer from depression, their families and carers. For more information call **1300 224 636** or visit www.beyondblue.org.au for more information.

Lifeline (131 114) is a confidential and anonymous national 24-hour telephone counselling service that also offers an extensive referral service. The **Lifeline Service Finder** can put you in touch with support services in your local area. More information is available at www.lifeline.org.au

My family is separating – what now? provides families with helpful information about separation. The website helps families understand their rights and responsibilities and offers information about emotional, financial and legal advice and support services. Visit www.familyseparation.humanservices.gov.au

The CSA's **Me and My** series of booklets provides practical advice and information about the different emotional, relationship and financial aspects associated with separation. You can view the booklets online or order copies from the CSA website at www.csa.gov.au/publications/1143.aspx

Interrelate Family Centres is a community based, not-for-profit organisation that provides relationship services across metropolitan, regional and rural New South Wales. For more information call **1300 736 966** or visit www.interrelate.org.au

Kids Helpline is a national counselling service for young people aged between five and 25 years old. It's free and confidential and your child can speak to a qualified counsellor on the telephone, or online, who has experience in helping other children affected by separation or divorce. Call **1800 551 800** at any time or visit www.kidshelpline.com.au

The **Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP)** is a free service that assists children and young people (from pre-school to the end of high school) during and after separation. To find out more go to the Family Relationships Online website and search for Supporting Children After Separation Program, www.familyrelationships.gov.au

...There are many trained professionals and volunteers who can offer assistance to you and your child...



The Department of Human Services' story/activity book, *Our family's changed*, is a useful resource aimed at children aged five to seven years of age, whose parents are separating or separated. The book identifies problems children may experience when going through separation and has fun activities that will help children revise what they have learnt. Order a free copy of *Our family's changed* at www.csa.gov.au/PublicationOrderForm/index.aspx

Parentline is a confidential telephone counselling service for parents. Parentline aims to support positive, caring relationships between parents, children and teenagers. You can call Parentline in your state or territory:

Parentline QLD & NT – 1300 301 300 (cost of a local call), 8am to 10pm, Monday to Sunday. For more information visit www.parentline.com.au

Parentline VIC – 132 289 (cost of a local call), 8am to 12am Monday to Friday, 10am to 10pm weekends. For more information www.parentline.vic.gov.au

Parent Helpline SA – 1300 364 100 (cost of a local call), 24 hours a day, Monday to Sunday. For more information visit www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parentline NSW – 1300 130 052 (cost of a local call), 24 hours a day, Monday to Sunday. For more information visit www.parentline.org.au

Parent Help Centre WA – (08) 9272 1466 or 1800 654 432 (free for STD callers), 24 hours a day, Monday to Sunday. For more information visit www.community.wa.gov.au/DFC/Resources/Helplines/Parenting+WA+Line.htm

ParentlineACT – (02) 6287 3833, (cost of a local call), 9am to 9pm, Monday to Friday (except public holidays). For more information visit parentlineact.org.au

Parenting Line TAS – 1300 808 178 (cost of a local call), 24 hours a day, Monday to Sunday.

It's important to remember that if you or your child is in danger of getting hurt, call **000** for immediate help in an emergency.

There are support services available that can help you if you find yourself in a violent or abusive situation.

You can call a support service in your state or territory:

National Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Helpline (24 hours):
1800 200 526

ACT – Domestic Violence Crisis Service (24 hours):
6280 0900

NSW – Community Services Domestic Violence Line (24 hours, 7 days):
1800 656 463

SA – Domestic Violence Helpline: **1800 800 098**

TAS – Domestic Violence Crisis Service: **1800 633 937**

QLD – Domestic Violence Helpline: **1800 811 811**

WA – Women's Domestic Violence Helpline (24 hours): **1800 007 339**

WA – Men's Domestic Violence Helpline (24 hours): **1800 000 599**

