

ADULT ISSUES

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

When a family breaks up it is usually difficult for everyone. It is like a death which brings with it feelings of grief and loss. Most people need time to get used to the changes and each person's response can be very different. Parents try to grapple with their own feelings while they make practical and very important decisions that will affect the whole family.

Splitting up may mean the end of a special relationship between two adults, but not the end of a relationship between a child and a parent. Children need the ongoing love and support of both parents. The best outcome for a child is usually reached when both parents share the responsibility and all the decisions that affect their child. This means making a shift from being partners to parenting partners (something more like business partners).

Although most parents want to do their best, many parents do not handle this well and some create more suffering for their children who are already in pain from the break-up. For a small number of parents who can't talk to each other, professional help is needed. The way in which parents handle splitting up and especially any conflict, has an enormous effect on the way children cope with their lives.

The separation process

The separation process is the same process you go through when a loved one dies—it is the process of grief. This process is painful and can take a long time, even years, for some parents to come through.

Although people experience it differently, most people go through:

- **shock and denial**—things are very confusing, and it is hard to believe (or perhaps you don't want to believe) that the separation is actually happening
- **sadness**—strong sense of loss, sometimes regret, sometimes guilt
- **anger and blame**—sometimes we blame ourselves or our partner or someone else (whether or not they actually had anything to do with the situation)
- **resolution or moving forward**—accepting the situation, making adjustments to life and getting on with it!

Children need the ongoing love and support of both parents.

How to tell the children

Children have no say in their family breaking up, but usually are the ones most affected by it.

- Talk to them when they're together (if this is possible), so they hear the same message. This will save confusion.
- Take into account the age and level of understanding of each child.
- Then speak to each separately to make sure they really understand and can ask questions.
- Let them know they will be told of all important decisions.
- Tell them what is going to happen before the practical separation to sort out their worries about daily decisions, for example, going to a school camp, dentist, sport, party.
- Tell them they will need courage.
- Let them know that they can't change your decision and they can't bring you back together.
- Remind them they have been one of the greatest pleasures of the relationship (only if this is true).
- Let them know you will listen to, and take their views seriously but it is the responsibility of adults to make the decisions.



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How children react

Children feel insecure and powerless when they see their family break-up. Children go through a grieving process, but show it differently from adults.

However, because they probably don't really understand why it is happening they often feel:

- shocked
- angry and sad about the loss of the family unit
- abandoned or rejected by the parent who leaves
- afraid that if one parent has 'left' the other one may also leave
- confused about whether it is all right to love the parent who no longer lives with them
- guilty, as though the separation must somehow be their fault
- worried about the parent who is not living with them.

How children cope with loss

Children don't show their pain and suffering all at once. They may seem to have got over it and then suddenly it reappears. Children, especially young ones, often don't have the words to express themselves clearly, so they can show their grief in different ways.

Some may:

- become aggressive or 'naughty'
- withdraw
- become 'clingy'
- act younger than their age, for example, children who have been toilet-trained may start to wet or soil again
- have nightmares, or find it hard to go to sleep
- change their eating patterns
- try to be really good at school and at home and because they appear to be coping, it's easy to think they are not suffering
- try to stand up for the parent who is being put down. Some try to protect the parent who seems the weaker
- show anger and hostility in play, with their toys, with brothers and sisters, with their friends or with you
- show problems in their behaviour and get punished, which makes them feel worse
- do well at school, others can't concentrate and slip backwards.

Being aware of the sort of feelings your child is going through may help you to understand your child's behaviour. Most children are confused and fearful about what will happen. Some are ashamed. They might not say to you what is worrying them because they don't want to see you upset or angry.

Who is responsible for me? ... Will the house be sold? ... What if Mum and Dad cannot agree about us? ... Can I

How children cope with loss *continued*

decide who I live with? ... Will I have to change schools? What will happen to my pets? Can I still see my friends? ... Will there be enough money to do the things we did before? ... What will I do if my other parent leaves or gets sick? ... If I am separated from my brothers and sisters, will we still see each other? ... Can I have a say about when I see my Dad if I'm not living with him? ... Can I make phone calls at any time to my other parent? ... How can I tell my friends what's happening?

All these feelings are very normal and just as strong as your own. The only difference is that as an adult you are in a position to make choices and take some control over the decisions. Your children on the other hand feel extremely vulnerable and powerless. It is even more scary when children hear you talking about going to court—this is often linked with doing something wrong or breaking the law.

How parents can feel

You can experience a range of feelings that although normal, may be very confusing, difficult and sometimes scary. You may have a sense of relief and hope. You may feel powerless in the decision and so feel angry, hurt and rejected. Your feelings may be so intense that it is easy to overlook, or not cope with what your children need right now.

You may be:

- exhausted or resentful from the day-to-day responsibilities of parenting alone
- confused about your child's behaviour
- angry if you feel the other parent is unreliable or unfair
- scared if you feel the other parent will become violent and difficult
- lonely when your children are not with you
- afraid that your children may not want to be with you and prefer the other parent
- worried about dealing with the legal process
- feeling good because you have made plans to share the parenting and take care of your children's needs
- finding pleasure in having fun with your child
- glad that you have more free time.

When you are so upset, try to avoid:

- seeing your children as your possessions—they are not—they are people
- saying things you don't mean and might regret later
- saying unkind things about the other parent
- making your children afraid that they might never see the other parent again
- allowing your children to become 'caught up' in the adults' arguments.

Children's needs at different ages

All children need to feel loved by both parents. Parents need to think first of their children's needs before and above their own needs. Children need to know that both parents will still be there to look after them and be involved in their lives. This may not always be the case.

Birth to 2 years of age

Children:

- are highly dependent on those who look after them
- will almost certainly be very physically and emotionally dependent on the parent who has done most of the day to day care; separation from that parent for any lengthy period can be very traumatic for the child
- have a very different understanding of time from adults; several hours can seem an eternity; the night world can also be very different (and scary) for them
- can be extremely sensitive to conflict between their parents
- will often fret for the absent parent, especially if it is the parent they feel closest to
- need short but frequent periods of contact. Overnight contact is often too stressful. When the contact parent has not previously been very involved with the child, it may be useful for the day-to-day parent to be present, at least at first. If this is too difficult, someone whom the child is comfortable with can help ease the situation.

3–5 years

Children:

- are a little less dependent on their parents
- usually have a basic understanding of what separation means; it can feel like a major crisis
- have more of a sense of time than younger children, but a short period of time still seems much longer than for adults
- often fret for the absent parent—things like photos and phone calls can be useful
- may cope with being away from their day-to-day parent overnight if they are well prepared; conflict between parents will make children less likely to cope with overnight contact
- are sensitive to one parent criticising the other, and may take it as criticism of themselves
- often imagine what they don't understand. They may talk about what they wish for as if it is true so you can't always take everything they say at face value ... while not telling lies, they may in fact be telling their truth rather than your truth.

6–8 years

Children:

- are more able to talk about their feelings
- often fantasise about getting their parents back together
- may try and look after their parents, both the parent they live with and the parent they visit, who is often seen as being all alone

- may try to take responsibility for arrangements when their parents cannot agree
- may blame themselves for the separation
- often express their feelings through behaviour problems, learning problems at school and physical symptoms like headaches and pains
- are usually comfortable with overnight visits, holidays of a week or so, and longer periods between visits, for example, alternate weekends
- find overnight visits during the school week are often quite disruptive. They may feel that they don't know where they fit and what they are doing.

9–11 years

Children:

- can usually talk about their own feelings and are able to partly understand the experiences and feelings of others
- are often very aware of feeling 'in the middle' of the parents
- sometimes try to get their parents back together
- can take sides, becoming one parent's 'soldier', especially when the conflict between the parents is high
- can cope with contact which is less frequent and for longer periods, and can also usually cope with travelling distances to visit a parent or relatives
- need to keep up their activities, sports, other groups and friendships, so contact plans need to take into account the child's wishes and the child's activities particularly on weekends
- can have meaningful contact with mail, phone calls, faxes, email and video recordings.

12–16 years

Adolescence involves greater independence from parents and is a difficult time generally, so a separation can be an added burden.

Teenagers:

- need time and space to work out their own feelings about their parents' separation
- develop their own sense of right and wrong; they can be critical of either or both parents' behaviour
- can react to separation by becoming rebellious
- can easily play one parent off against the other to escape parental control, for example, move from house to house
- can react with anger and rejection if pressured by either parent
- often take on a lot of responsibility for a parent, for their brothers and sisters, or for household tasks
- need flexibility so that contact plans are based around the teenagers's wishes. When making arrangements both parents need to talk it over with them and take their wishes and activities into account.

Making decisions

Parents usually know their children better than anyone else, and are usually in a better position than anyone else to make decisions about their children. Indeed, part of being a parent is making important decisions for your child, usually because your child is not always able to understand or appreciate all aspects of an issue.

Sometimes parents believe that children should make up their own minds about where they want to live and when and how often to see each parent.

Some points to consider in this respect are:

- having to make decisions about such important matters as who they live with can place too big a burden on children before they are mature, old or experienced enough to handle it
- the more mature the children, the more weight can be given to their wishes
- making decisions forces children to make a choice between their parents. This usually makes them feel guilty towards the parent they have chosen not to live with. Some children choose to live with the parent they feel most sorry for, not necessarily the one they feel most comfortable with or who meets their needs best
- children usually want to have a say in big decisions which affect their lives
- children who say they want to be the decisionmakers usually realise that by making the decision they will upset at least one of their parents
- often children who try to be the decision-makers do so because they are afraid no one else will.

The effect of ongoing disagreements

Conflict in families is normal. This is how we learn to deal with conflict in the world outside. Depending on what happens in our family, we can learn to deal well with conflict. On the other hand we may learn negative ways to manage conflict or learn to avoid it altogether.

Children are very sensitive to conflict between their parents, and they can be badly affected by conflict which continues after separation.

Research shows quite clearly that conflict between parents is the most critical factor which affects children's adjustment after separation.

Children who feel that they are 'the meat in the sandwich' are the ones who are the most seriously affected by the conflict.

If the conflict between parents continues, children may become distressed every time they go from one parent to the other. They may feel pressure to take sides. They may have ongoing problems at school, and, at worst, their development may be seriously hampered.

Children who witness intense conflict or violence between parents are at risk of developing long-term emotional problems. The effect on children of seeing or hearing a parent being hurt is similar to the child being hurt himself.

What parents can do

If a parent cannot accept a separation, then it is likely that the children will also have great difficulty accepting the situation.

- Let your children know they are loved and will be protected.
- Let them know that it is not their fault but the parents' responsibility.
- Give them a sense of you being in control, even if you don't feel it (this helps them feel safe).
- Let your children know you are feeling sad or upset by the separation. It is also important to reassure children that you are okay and that things will get better.
- Try to avoid criticising the other parent to your children—it makes them feel that they have to take sides. If you can't be positive, be at least neutral in what you say. Save your criticism to talk over with an understanding friend.
- Spend time with your children to talk about how they are feeling and coping with the separation. Hold them close and let them cry if they need to. Let them express their anger.
- Allow your children to love you both. Make it clear to children that they don't have to choose between their parents.
- Be tolerant with their behaviours—this may be the only way they can show how they feel.
- Remember that children usually want to please parents. One of the ways they do this is by telling you what they think you want to hear. 'I want to be with you' may really mean 'I want to be with you and I want to be with the other parent too'.
- Understand that children do not normally reject a parent unless they feel they have no other choice. Sometimes if the conflict between parents becomes unbearable a child may reject a parent (usually the one they don't live with) as a way of surviving emotionally. Where a child has a poor or frightening relationship with a parent, they may also reject that parent.
- Show you understand their feeling towards you and the other parent.
- Keep things in your child's life as familiar as possible, for example, home, school, friends, pets, toys, sport, clubs.
- Try to keep your children out of parental arguments. Never ask them to be messengers. It is never a good move to 'pump' children for information about the other parent.
- Be courteous and calm at 'handover' times. Arguments at handover times are particularly distressing to children. Your behaviour in different situations teaches your child how to handle conflict.
- Give reassurance that you will be okay while they are away, and will be there when they return.
- Remember you can have a very good relationship with children when you don't live with them—in fact you can become even more special to your children because their time with you is precious.
- Be prepared for children to come back grumpy from contact with the other parent, particularly when the separation is fairly new. This may not mean that they have had a bad time—it may just be that the contact reminds them that their parents are no longer together.
- Be mindful of different parenting styles. The rules in the two households do not have to be the same. Children can adjust to this. It is important that parents don't undermine each other and so confuse and distress their children.
- Keep children in contact with grandparents and other relatives as this will help them know they belong and feel secure.
- Make contact with childcare workers or teachers so they understand the situation and can support your child.
- Introduce a new partner gradually. This will usually be an awkward time for everyone. Parents often want their children to approve of the new partner. This can place pressure on children. Don't expect them to accept your new partner if they are still grieving over the loss of the other parent and the family unit. They can feel resentful.
- Think about and talk over how both parents can 'be there' at special events, sport etc. This is extremely difficult when there is hostility between parents. Sometimes parents need to put their child's feelings above their own.
- Most parents decide between themselves about the best arrangements for their children. If there is conflict, sometimes mediation can help to sort out differences and agreement to a parenting plan.
- Write down a 'parenting plan' about where your children will live, arrangements for schools, health, holidays and sport. For the 'parenting plan' to be legally binding, you need to register it in the Family Court. Once registered you cannot change it without the court's permission.

What the law says in the ACT

The *Family Law Act* does not talk about parents' rights, but about the responsibilities of parents and the rights of children.

- Both parents have the responsibility for the on-going care, welfare and development of the children.
- Important decisions about health, schooling, religion and legal decisions for example, getting a passport for a child, changing a child's name are decisions that should be made by both parents.
- Children have the right to know and be cared for by both parents.
- Children have the right to regular contact with both parents (and other special people, including family members).
- The child's best interests (not the parents') is the most important consideration in making decisions about children.
- Children's views should be considered by parents.
- Children need protection from harm, including witnessing violence.
- Decisions about children should be based on each child's unique circumstances.

Reminders

- Your responsibility to your child doesn't stop when your family breaks up.
- Think first of your children's needs, then your own.
- Make the shift from being partners to parenting partners—it can be difficult.
- Listen and take account of your children's wishes but don't make them take responsibility for the final decisions on important things.
- Working together for your children's sake is one of the best gifts you can give your children after a separation.
- Keeping contact with grandparents and other relatives will help children feel secure.
- Arrangements about children will need to change from time to time as children grow and develop.
- The way you handle separation, especially the conflict, has an enormous impact on the way your children cope with their lives.

Contacts

Family Relationships Advice Line	8am–8pm Monday–Friday, 10am–4pm Saturday	1800 050 321
Legal Advice Information Line	9am–4pm Monday–Friday	1300 654 314
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833
Relationships Australia	9am–5pm Monday–Friday	1300 364 277

Websites

www.csa.gov.au	Free CD dealing with separation and other publications
www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including <i>After the breakup</i> , <i>Families that work well</i>

This guide's content has been produced by Parenting SA and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

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