

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.

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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 violence
- hopeful about creating a new, exciting 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.

Children's feelings about the break-up can be just as strong as parents' feelings.



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Spending time in two homes

When children are spending time in two homes, it is important that they feel they belong in both. Having a space in the home 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 behaviour and bedtimes. Sometimes you may have to accept that you do things differently.

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

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

- make sure they have regular contact with the other parent. This 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.

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, a Family Dispute Resolution provider can 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 and religious needs.

Where children live and spend their time can affect property settlement and child support payments. It is important to get legal advice when making parenting arrangements.

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. If you want to make a plan that is legally binding, you need to apply to the court for a Parenting Order.

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

What the law says

The *Family Law Act* (1975) says that when a family breaks up, children have the right to:

- know and be cared for by both parents
- regular contact with special people such as grandparents and other family members
- protection from abuse, neglect or family violence.

Parenting Orders

If you can't agree on a parenting plan you will need a certificate from a Family Dispute Resolution provider to apply to the court for a Parenting Order. They can also give you a certificate to apply to the court if the matter is urgent, or if there is child abuse or family violence.

Parenting Orders made by the court are legally binding so it is a good idea for both parents to get legal advice first. You will have to go back to court if you want to change the Order. The court can impose penalties if a parent doesn't do what is outlined in the Parenting Order.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Published by ParentLink, Community Services Directorate
GPO Box 158 Canberra ACT 2601

e parentlink@act.gov.au
t 13 34 27

Looking for more information?

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Effect of conflict on children

On-going conflict has a big impact on babies, children and young people. Seeing or hearing a parent being hurt verbally, emotionally or physically is similar to children being hurt themselves.

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 tensions 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.



ParentLink — for other parenting guides, online parenting information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support
www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>