



Divorce & Separation

About children's responses to divorce and separation

Every child and young person's experience with the change of their known family unit will be unique, with some coping better than others. Lots of children struggle at first and it can take time for them to adjust to changes brought about by divorce or separation. In the immediacy of a break up, children's early response can involve a number of defence behaviours, including: denial, disbelief, dissociation, hyperactivity, irritability and protest, alarm and panic. Children may even experience grief and display behaviours and emotions that indicate yearning and pining, sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt and despair.

Over time children can learn to cope with the change, and there are lots of ways to help your children adjust as detailed in the What Can Help section below.

Responses to divorce and separation differ according to age group:

Babies and toddlers may find their routines disrupted and pick up on parents' emotional states and they may:

- Become very irritable, crying and whining a lot
- Have trouble sleeping
- Be more fussy with food
- Become angry and naughty

Pre-school children (three to five year olds)

- May become confused, frightened or clingy and return to earlier patterns of behaviour, e.g. bedwetting, thumb sucking
- Both boys and girls may start displaying aggressive, confrontational, attention seeking behaviour
- This may lead to other parents wanting to keep their children away, so the child becomes isolated

Primary school children (six to nine year olds) may be thinking more deeply about the situation, internalise their feelings and may:

- Cry and experience bouts of sadness
- Miss a departed parent
- Act out aggressively towards either parent
- Express guilt or feel they are to blame for the breakup of the relationship/marriage
- Work to encourage their parents to get back together

Pre-teen children (10 to 12 year olds) may view the situation in black-and-white terms and become intensely angry and may:

- Reject either or both parent(s) that they consider to be at fault
- Experience confused and conflicting feelings
- Feel loyal to both parents, and may worry about 'losing' both of the
- Find that their school work suffers

Adolescent (13-18 year olds) tend to be the ones that are most 'caught in the middle' and may respond by:

- Acting out, engaging in risky behaviour, being angry, defiant and difficult
- Removing themselves from the family home, staying over with friends
- Over-reacting, being over-dramatic, out of-control with their emotions

Helping children cope

Try to avoid the following behaviours and situations to help your child or children to cope with the separation:

- Conflict including shouting and fighting
- Bad-mouthing or belittling the other parent
- Limiting contact between the child and the other parent (if the other parent is safe for the child to be around) and forbidding discussion about them
- Creating the impression the other parent does not love the child or forcing the child to reject the parent
- Inconsistent or unclear discipline
- Ignoring the child's changing needs and emotions. Try to understand how they are feeling and take into account that their behaviour and emotions may be different as a result of the changes in their life
- Keeping the child in abusive environments including physical, sexual and/or emotional

What can help? What to do next

These are some things that can make a difference:

1. Place the feelings and needs of the child above adult feelings and considerations.
2. Work hard to ensure that children have good relationships and easy contact with both parents.
3. Children can adjust to loss when they can rely on stability, being given honest information, encouraged to ask questions, participating in family discussions and turning to a trusted adult for comfort.
4. Decide when and how to talk to the children, with both parents together as the ideal. Make sure you give an age-appropriate and if possible, a straightforward explanation for the family break up.
5. Try to shield children from overt conflict between parents - this can be frightening and make them anxious.
6. Listen to their concerns, accept their emotions and express your sorrow and understanding for their feelings of loss and grief.
7. Look at it through their eyes – they don't want their parents to divorce, they don't want their parents to be unhappy, they will wonder what they've done wrong, they will be scared that the other parent might leave them too, they will miss the absent parent, they will want to talk about them too.
8. Provide strong and constant reassurance – “It's ok to cry”; “It's not your fault”. Explain that a child can never be responsible for what happens in an adult relationship.
9. When faced with anger and bad behaviour, provide love, understanding and good discipline. Create opportunities to discuss their feelings and actions, define what is acceptable and what is not and work together on finding alternative and appropriate ways of dealing with angry feelings.
10. Don't ask a child/young person to take sides or act as a go-between.
11. Allow them to continue their lives and to develop and maintain their relationship with each parent.
12. Even if children feel relieved at a family break up where violence is a significant factor, most children will still feel some loss and grief.
13. Fathers are the main or sole parent/carer in only 10% of families. In cases of separation/divorce, 7 out of 10 fathers have a strong presence in their children's lives. Children who fare best after divorce are those who see their fathers most often; it usually reflects a relatively harmonious relationship between parents.
14. Maintain predictable and reliable arrangements, stick to familiar routines and activities, and minimise change.
15. Be clear, consistent and organised when arranging meet ups with the other parent. Keep up usual and familiar relationships with grandparents, other close family and friends.
16. Remember that how well the parents adjust has a significant impact on how well children adjust.
17. Find good support for yourself. Seek professional advice if you or your child is still not coping after a while.

Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations.

YoungMinds Parents Lounge www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge Our Parents Helpline experts answer questions about divorce and separation. #Take20 www.youngminds.org.uk/take20 Ideas and suggestions to help parents find 20 minutes to do something together with their child to support confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Top Tips www.youngminds.org.uk/take20/top-tips-for-you-and-your-child Advice around supporting a child through a time of difficulty or change.	
Gingerbread www.gingerbread.org.uk Support for single parents in England and Wales including advice and information about child support, benefits, tax credits and your child's contact with their other parent. Freephone helpline: 0808 802 0925 Open Mon: 10am-6pm, Tues, Thurs & Fri: 10am-4pm, and Wed: 10am-1pm and 5-7pm.	Advice Northern Ireland www.adviceni.net Information about benefits, tax, welfare and debt for people living in Northern Ireland. Helplines open 9am-5pm Monday-Friday. For parenting support, call Parenting NI on 0808 801 0722 . Or go to www.adviceni.net/advice to find the right number for the information you need.
Family Line www.family-action.org.uk Provides support with family issues via phone, text and email. You can also access longer-term support through Befrienders and Counsellors. Open Monday to Friday, 9am-3pm and 6-9pm. Phone: 0808 802 6666 Text: 07537 404 282 Email: familyline@family-action.org.uk	Sorting out separation www.cmoptions.org/en/sortingoutseparation/index.asp Government website with links to useful information and organisations about child support, benefits, housing, domestic violence, and more. Helpline: 0800 988 0988 (Mon- Fri 8am-8pm & Sat 9am-4pm).
One Parent Families Scotland www.opfs.org.uk Support for single parents in Scotland. Lone Parent Helpline: 0808 801 0323 (Monday-Thursday 9:30am-4pm).	Citizens Advice www.citizensadvice.org.uk Information about ending a relationship, child care, money and your home at www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/ending-a-relationship
Relate Support and guidance to help make the transition of divorce and separation easier for families, including around helping children with their feelings and behaviours. www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-separation-and-divorce	Family Lives www.familylives.org.uk Information, advice, guidance and support for parents on all aspects of family life, including how separation affects children.

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<p>Families Need Fathers www.fnf.org.uk Information and advice around maintaining a child's relationship with both parents during and after separation. Helpline: 0300 0300 363 (Open Mon-Fri 9am-10pm and weekends 10am-3pm).</p>	<p>Cafcass www.cafcass.gov.uk Information for parents/carers and children and young people involved in family court proceedings.</p>
<p>Resolution www.resolution.org.uk Resolution (formerly known as the Solicitors Family Law Association SFLA) offer a constructive, non-confrontational approach to separation. Phone: 01689 820272 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm) Email: info@resolution.org.uk Useful brochure for download – Separation and Divorce: Helping Parents to Help Children www.resolution.org.uk/site_content_files/files/resolution_d_and_s_brochure_final.pdf</p>	<p>Mediation www.nfm.org.uk Helps separating parents make arrangements for their children. England & Wales Contact National Family Mediation for details of your local branch: 0300 4000 636 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm). Scotland www.relationships-scotland.org.uk Contact Relationships Scotland for details of your local branch: 0345 119 2020 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4:30pm) Northern Ireland Contact Family Mediation NI for details of your local branch: 028 9024 3265</p>
<p>MindEd for Families www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html MindEd for families is a website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.</p>	
<p>Childline www.childline.org.uk If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small. 24/7 helpline: 0800 1111 Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat To email: sign up on the website at www.childline.org.uk/registration</p>	<p>Child Law Advice (at Coram Children's Legal Centre) www.childlawadvice.org.uk Provides free legal advice and information on child, family and education law to parents, carers and young people. Phone support available Monday-Friday 8am-6pm. If you are calling about family or child law the number is 0300 330 5480.</p>
<p>Youth Wellbeing Directory www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>YoungMinds Crisis Messenger Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis. Text YM to 85258 Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.</p>