

A guide for parting parents and their children



**Don't kid yourself that your children
aren't being affected**

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Family relationships are fundamental to the happiness and well-being of children and their parents. We know that when parents break up there can be significant, negative impacts for everyone involved.

It is very important for separating parents to realise the impact of their actions on their children.

When you are going through such a tough emotional time, it can be difficult to pay as much attention to your children as you want to. But this is the time they need your support more than ever. Simple, small steps like the ones in this guide can make a huge difference.

We hope that you find this guide helpful at this most difficult time.

When parents part

If your relationship is breaking up you probably feel emotionally battered and physically drained. You can wake having panic attacks in the small hours, day-to-day life feels impossible. You're at your lowest, and it's hard to cope with anyone else's needs – even your children's.

With the best will in the world, it's easy to snap if a little one asks for Daddy, or a youngster moans that "Mum would have remembered my football kit."

But how you and your former partner handle your children's feelings through this crisis will affect the rest of their lives – how they get on at school, how they behave towards you, how likely they are to get into trouble, whether they can form happy relationships, how they will behave as parents.



It's a huge responsibility, just at a time when you don't feel you can cope with anything more. But the basic guidelines on how to protect them from the worst of the fall-out from your relationship breakdown are quite straight-forward.

They do demand patience and determination from you, which will feel tough at times, but you will get the pay-off of children who won't give you such a tough time in the future – as well as growing up happier and more balanced in themselves than they will if caught up in the battles of your break-up.

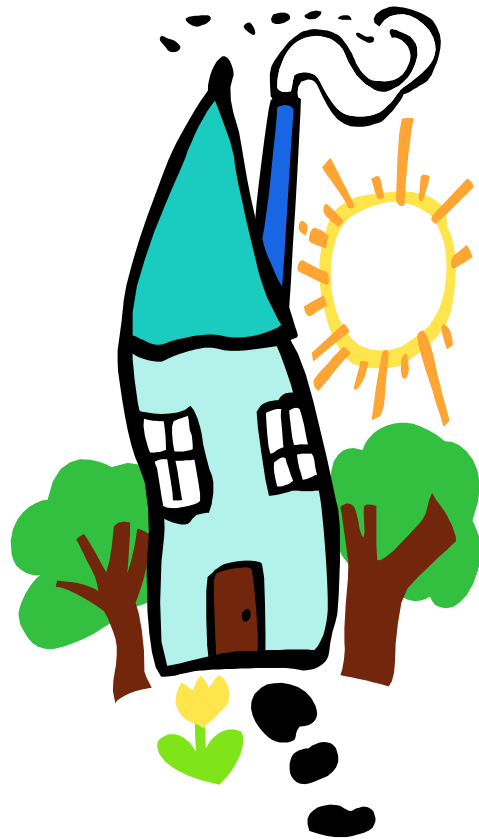
Many parting parents assume that, because they save the rows until the children are in bed or out of the house, they don't know there's anything wrong.

They believe that babies and toddlers who aren't yet speaking don't understand the rows and so won't be harmed by them.

In fact, babies, toddlers and children of all ages are like extremely sensitive emotional satellite dishes finely tuned to their parents' reactions. They pick up the merest hint of tension let alone outright anger.

They may not say anything about it but will be unsettled by it, feel unhappy about it.

Sooner or later their behaviour will reflect their distress. Babies may cry more – so adding to the strain on you. Small children may play up more or be more clingy. Older children may turn more rebellious and get themselves into trouble at home and / or at school.



Teenagers may hide their feelings and you may assume they are so grown up they are not going to be affected, but research suggests that teenage boys are possibly the most troubled by their parents breaking up.

It can help enormously if parents – maybe dads especially – take the time and make it easy for them to talk about how they feel. They may talk most easily in an informal setting, in the car for example, travelling to and from a sports outing, rather than if you sit them down for an earnest heart-to-heart.

Of course try to keep any rows away from the children but be as honest as you can with them. Don't try to pretend nothing is wrong. Say you aren't getting on but emphasise – as long as it's true – that you and your partner both love them.

Keep spelling out that it isn't their fault – lots of children blame themselves for their parents' relationship breaking down. Give them lots of cuddles.

Ask the children how they feel, if they have any worries. If you're separating, for example, children can be frantic to know if the cat is still going to live with them, or if they are still going to see Granny, which may not even have occurred to you as a problem.

Remember the importance of familiar routines to children. If you've always gone swimming on Friday evenings or had a certain meal on a particular day, try to make sure the children still enjoy that with one parent or the other. Look for chances to establish new and welcome routines for them – special breakfast with Dad on weekend mornings, or cook-

Enlist all the help you can to ease the strain on you all – from friends, family, and any helpful outside organizations.

Tell your children's school what is going on, so they can recognise any behavioural changes as signs of distress not rebellion.

A failing relationship can make you feel too ashamed to admit it openly but one in three couples with children split up these days. It's sad but it means you are far from alone. Don't be too proud to ask for help. You're only human and anyone going through a major relationship breakdown needs support.



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Don't paint your partner as a monster

Whatever your partner may have done, whether you see yourself as the injured party or not, the children you share can never have another mother or father

Much as you may long to write your ex out of your life, you cannot write them out of your children's life.

Not only do they almost certainly love their mum or dad, they feel themselves to be at least partly like their other parent as well as you.

If you rubbish your ex, they take in bad messages about themselves, which can show up in self-destructive behaviour like doing much worse at school, self-harming or getting involved in

“ Keep reminding yourself your children need both of you.”

Keep up the contact

When parents split up, the children all too often effectively lose one parent.

Sometimes one parent finds the break-up so painful they walk away, sometimes one makes it very hard for the other to stay in touch with the children.

For the children it is like a bereavement. It tends to make them feel insecure, anxious about losing the one parent they have got living with them, wary of loving anyone new in case they get

Even if you now hate your children's other parent with a passion, talk to him or her if at all possible about how you two can work together to reassure your children.

Keep reminding yourself your children need both of you. Organise regular contact or shared parenting, unless there are serious reasons why this would be a bad idea from the children's point of view.



Once you have agreed arrangements, keep to them, or you risk hurting your children deeply. Even if you are at loggerheads over every other issue, try to leave the children out of any point-scoring.

You will almost certainly need help with this. You may find the idea of even talking to your child's other parent horrendous, and it is so easy to get side-tracked on to the painful issues which led to your break-up.

While it can help to relieve your feelings talking to family and friends, it's not always a good idea to get them involved in sorting out care and contact arrangements.

They will have their own views which may just add to the conflict.

Your child's school can be very helpful.

It's a good idea to let the school know there are problems at home, because teachers may then react far more helpfully if your children play up.

If your children seem seriously distressed, you can ask your GP or the school for a referral for family therapy or for your children to see a child psychologist or psychotherapist.

Schools have guidance counselors available to counsel children. Don't see your children having counselling as a sign that you are failing as a parent but as showing how informed you are about their needs at this difficult time.



Sources of help for parents

www.parentlineplus.org.uk - download a guide to Splitting Up.

If your parents have split up

If you are a young person who has been badly affected by your parents' relationship break-up, don't suffer in silence. It will only make it worse. You are far from alone. One in four under-16s have separated parents.

You might long for your family to stay together but it's outside your power. Don't blame yourself.

It may help to talk to your parents, either for more understanding of what went wrong, or for reassurance that they do still care about you. They may not realise how badly you've been affected, nor what is especially bothering you. If their relationship break-up is involving you moving school, home, perhaps living with another family, you will have a lot of practical issues to cope with. It's only normal to find it hard. If your parents seem too over-loaded with their own worries, talk to a good family friend or relative.

You do have the right to some support and understanding for what you're going through too.

If one parent moans to you about the other, say you can't help loving both of them. Ask them to find someone

Try to keep up contact with both parents. It may feel more distressing if they are at "daggers drawn", but you will be glad in the long run.

You have to use your judgement about sharing your feelings with friends. You are bound to know lots of other young people whose parents have split up. If you've got friends you can trust, they will probably be very understanding, but be wary of giving ammunition to bullies or children you can't trust.

If you're still at school, tell a teacher what has been happening. Then you are likely to get a far more understanding reaction to problems with your schoolwork or behaviour.



Tell your parents what routines of family life help you feel at home.

Make a list of all the practical points that are worrying you or are important to you about how your new life will be, then talk them over with both parents.

Ask both to write down arrangements, for example, including your day-to-day activities so you know who is meant to give you a lift.

Sources of help for children and young people

www.itsnotyourfault.org is a friendly website for children and young people whose parents are splitting up.



Helpful reading

There is a range of excellent books for both separating parents and their children, giving far more detailed guidance than is possible here.

Moving On: Breaking up without breaking down, a Relate guide by Suzie Hayman (Vermilion).

How to Have a Healthy Divorce, a Relate guide by Paula Hall (Vermilion).

Putting Children First: A handbook for separated parents by Karen and Nick Woodall (Piatkus).

Help Your Children Cope With Your Divorce, a Relate guide by Paula Hall (Vermilion).

Teach Yourself Successful Step-parenting by Suzie Hayman (Hodder Education).

Getting Your Children Through Divorce: A parent's guide to separation by Anne Hooper (Robson).

Helping Children Cope With Divorce by Rosemary Wells (Sheldon Press).

How To Be A Great Divorced Dad by Simon Baker with Alley Einstein (Foulsham).

Two of Everything by Babette Cole (Red Fox) is a reassuring book you can read to under-fives.

Children Don't Divorce by Rosemary Stones (Happy Cat) is helpful for school-age children.

You can order all these at [good bookshops](#) or [online](#).