

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.

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 a lot of stress, or violence
- hopeful or excited about a new 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
- guilty or worry that the break-up is their fault.

How children react

How children react depends on their age, development and temperament.

Young children may not have the words to say how they feel, and can show it in the way they behave. Some may:

- change sleeping or eating habits
- be clingy, aggressive or 'naughty'
- act younger, eg start to wet again after being toilet-trained.

School-aged children are more able to talk about their feelings but may also act them out.

They might:

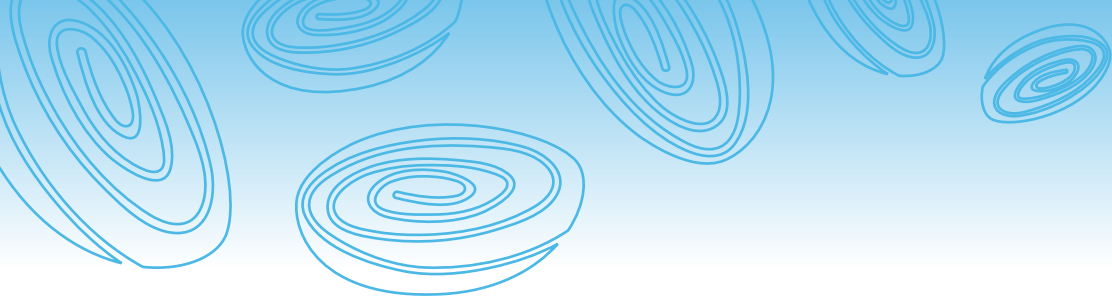
- try to be really good, thinking this will make everything OK
- withdraw or have trouble focussing
- 'misbehave' at home or at school.

Children often don't adjust to the new situation all at once. They may seem OK for a while and then show signs of not coping.

Adolescents need time and space to work out how they feel. It can add stress at a time when they are dealing with their own rapid physical and emotional changes. They are becoming more independent but still need structure and routine, and the security of their family.

It can be easy to think that children and young people are doing OK if they don't talk about the break-up. Some might not want to tell you how they feel in case you get angry or upset.

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



Fighting and tension between parents causes children the most stress in a break up. It helps to keep the focus on the children, not problems in the relationship.

Helping children to cope

It is not easy to make the change to a new family set-up and living arrangements. It takes time and children will need your support as they settle into their new life.

It will help children to cope if you explain in ways they can understand. Answer their questions and listen to their feelings. Tell children:

- you are both still their parents and you both love them. Make it clear they don't have to choose between you
- they will still see the parent they don't live with
- they can't change things or bring you back together
- you will listen to what they want, but adults make the big decisions.

Don't ask younger children to decide things such as who they want to live with. This puts a lot of pressure on them and forces them to choose between their parents. As children mature, they can have more say in decisions that affect them.

It is important not to burden children with adult problems or to look to them for emotional support. Give children a sense that you are in control, even if you don't feel it at times. Let them know you are OK even when you seem upset, and that you expect things to get better.

It's best not to speak badly about the other parent in front of children. This really hurts them. They are very loyal and love you both.

It can also help children to cope if you:

- keep things as predictable and consistent as you can, eg keep to usual routines with schools, friends, sports, clubs
- make sure they have regular contact with the other parent (if this is safe). It 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.

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 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 bedtimes and use of technology. Sometimes you may have to accept that you do things differently.

Try to make handover 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.



What the law says

The Family Law Act (1975) focuses on the best interests of children and says they have the right (except when it is not in their best interests) to:

- know and be cared for by both parents
- spend regular time and have regular communication with special people such as grandparents and other relatives
- protection from abuse, neglect or family violence
- enjoy their culture, including with other people who share that culture.

It encourages parents to come to agreements about their children without resorting to the legal system.

Parenting plans

Some parents make a verbal agreement about the care of their children. For others it can work better 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 practitioner can help you work out a parenting plan.

A parenting plan should be based on what is best for each child. 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.

A parenting plan could 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, cultural 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.

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Parenting Orders

If you can't agree on a parenting plan, you can apply to the Court for a Parenting Order. You must provide a certificate from a Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner to confirm that you have made a genuine effort to resolve things by Family Dispute Resolution. There are various exemptions to this requirement and you should seek legal advice if you think you may be exempt.

Parenting Orders made by the Court are legally binding so it is important to seek legal advice before applying.

Effect of conflict on children

Conflict or violence in the family has a big impact on babies, children and young people whether they see and hear the violence, or not. When a parent is hurt verbally, emotionally or physically, 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 tension and conflict. Even if you can't agree, try to be calm and polite towards each other.

Getting help

It is important to get legal advice if you need it, and help to deal with any violence or other issues in your home.

If you are finding it hard to deal with the break-up there are counselling services that can help. The better you cope, the better you can help your children. Consider counselling for children as well, so they have someone independent to talk to.





Want more information?

Emergency

Police, Fire, Ambulance 000
Police attendance 131 444
Lifeline 13 11 14

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732, 24 hours
Telephone and online counselling for anyone experiencing family violence www.1800respect.org.au

Domestic Violence Crisis Line

Phone 1800 800 098, 24 hours
Support for anyone experiencing domestic violence, including safe accommodation.
Interpreters available www.womenssafetyservices.com.au

Services providing legal advice or support with relationship issues

Legal Services Commission of SA

Phone 1300 366 424, Mon to Fri, 9am-4.30pm
For free legal help and advice
Phone the Child Support Unit on 8111 5576 for legal advice regarding child support
If you need a translator, phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450 and ask for 1300 366 424. Has 24 hour online Legal Chat and amica, an online program helping couples make parenting and property agreements simply (<https://amica.gov.au>) www.lsc.sa.gov.au

Family Relationships Online

Phone Family Relationships Advice Line 1800 050 321, 8am-8pm, Mon to Fri; 10am-4pm Sat
A confidential national service helping families affected by relationship or separation issues
Can help you find legal, financial and dispute resolution information, advice and counselling, and refer you to local services, including Children's Contact Services www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Family Court of Australia

For information about family law and dispute resolution. Has online chat service
www.familycourt.gov.au

Child Support Scheme

Phone 131 272, Mon to Fri, 8.30am-4.45pm
For information about the Australian Government child support scheme and assistance with payments
www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/child-support

Centrelink

See www.servicesaustralia.gov.au for information about benefits available
Centrelink phone self-service, 136 240, 24 hours
For child support enquiries phone 131 272, Mon to Fri, 8.30am-4.45pm

Relationships Australia SA

Phone 1300 364 277 (cost of a local call) or 1800 182 325 (country callers)
For programs and services supporting parents and children during and after separation
Provides safe, supported Children's Contact Service www.rasa.org.au

Anglicare SA

Phone 8305 9200
For programs supporting parents and children after separation
Has Children's Contact Service (phone 8392 3180) for safe, child-friendly visits or changeovers
www.anglicare.com.au

Uniting Communities

Phone 1800 615 677
For family and relationship counselling and programs www.unitingcommunities.org

Centacare

Phone 8215 6700
For parenting and family relationships counselling and programs www.centacare.org.au

Support for children and young people

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800, 24 hours
Phone and online counselling for children and young people 5-25 years www.kidshelpline.com.au

ReachOut

Online support for young people dealing with everyday issues or tough times
<https://au.reachout.com>

Headspace

Mental health information and support for young people 12 to 25 years, and their families. Find eHeadspace for online support or your local Headspace centre www.headspace.org.au

Parenting

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100, 24 hours
For advice on child health and parenting
www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment. The child health nurses can talk with you about your child's health and development
www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network

For information about raising children including helping them cope with family break-up
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Thinking separation?', 'Blended families', 'Single parenting', 'Families that work well', 'Family violence', 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years', 'Grief and loss' and 'Dealing with a crisis'
www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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Revised:12/2020.