

## Additional Assessment Questions Divorce and separation

1. How do you feel about what is happening?
2. Have your feelings changed at all?
3. Have your parents made arrangements for your future?
4. Have you been involved in this – is this what you want?

5.4

These questions could be used to create an environment in which the young people feel able to talk. They can also be adapted to be used with younger children – perhaps with the use of drawing.

## Understanding Childhood

**Understanding Childhood** is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into the child's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to make sense of their behaviour.

This leaflet was originally published by the Child Psychotherapy Trust.

Leaflets available from:

[www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

email: [info@understandingchildhood.net](mailto:info@understandingchildhood.net)

# divorce and separation

## helping children and parents to cope



As parents, we all hope to build a safe familiar world for our children to grow up in. When your children experience the ordinary losses and disappointments of life, as an adult you can stand back a bit from their distress and offer them your sympathy and support. But when you face a serious family loss or upheaval, it is a struggle to manage your own grief, disappointment or anger, so at first you may not be able to help your children. It is not surprising that at times most parents find this double burden too much to cope with.

We hope this leaflet will help you to understand how you and your children may be feeling and to think about what may be best for all of you when relationships go seriously wrong or break down.

### How parents come to terms with separation

Separation affects everyone. The loss of a shared life and giving up the idea of a future together for the family is bound to be painful. Most people do manage to make the adjustment, but it can be a long haul and there will be times when you can't see how things will turn out. You need to make allowances for yourself and your children for some time – maybe for several years.

### Living with the children

It is usually the mother who remains living with the children, often as a lone parent. Many people feel very alone at times like this. Before you can give support to your children, you need to feel supported yourself. If you are fortunate, you have understanding and supportive family and friends who rally round. Some people also turn to their own cultural and religious communities. This can be a valuable source of support.

There is a natural and inevitable temptation to fill the gap left by your partner by taking one of your children into your confidence. But this puts your child in a very difficult position and may stop them being able to turn to you as a parent.

This may be the time to talk to someone who is not personally involved – perhaps your GP in the first instance.

## Keeping in contact with both parents

Even when children feel it is better for their parents to part, almost all of them want to know that it is not going to cost them one of their parents. They will want to keep in touch with both of you and with the wider family generally, including their grandparents.



If you have separated by mutual agreement, you are probably able to work together to soothe your child through the difficult changes ahead. However, when the parent with the main care of the children and the parent who has the contact find it difficult to see each other's point of view, the child's experience of the separation is much more difficult.

The parent who has left

the family home almost certainly feels that they have to cope with more changes in their daily life than the one who stays there with the children. They may feel they are increasingly losing touch with the everyday lives of the children and have to find new ways of being together with the children.

Some parents find the loss of daily contact with their children so painful, and the children's distress so difficult to cope with, that they decide it is better to make a clean break. But children feel deeply hurt and rejected when a parent suddenly disappears from their life even if the parent thought they were acting for the best.

Any contact is usually better than none at all. When regular visits are not possible, letters, photographs, birthday cards and phone calls make a child feel cared about by both parents.

For some children the possibility of contact causes great distress. This may be related to exposure to violence or other traumas and professional help may be needed for the child.

## Visits

Arrangements must be faithfully kept so that your child is not let down. This can be difficult for both parents.

- From the point of view of the resident parent, visits may seem annoyingly like treats while they have the daily responsibility of sorting out routine chores and activities, such as school, homework and discipline. If contact arrangements ('access') are flexible, they may feel that

## Further help

You may find it helpful to contact a group of other lone parents, such as Gingerbread, or your own community group for information and support.

If you have concerns about your children you may find it helpful to talk to your health visitor, GP or school about a referral to your local NHS Child and Family Guidance Centre.

For adults, local dispute resolution and mediation services exist through the courts, National Family Mediation or privately.

Often the practical arrangements for contact with the ex-partner are a problem. There may be a contact centre in your area which provides a neutral safe place for contact visits. They often help when ex-partners do not want to meet face to face.

If you need specialised legal advice, solicitors who are members of the Family Law Association are able to help.

The library or town hall can help you with addresses for the services mentioned or look in the telephone book under your local health authority.

they can never make their own plans or have any privacy.

- The visiting parent may see questions about what will happen during a visit as doubting their parenting ability.

## Protecting children from adult problems

When adults are angry with each other, misunderstandings can easily occur.

Try to put the children first.

- Remember you are both still parents even if you are no longer partners.
- Children need to be kept clear of the conflict between their parents.
- Resist any temptation to use contact arrangements as a way of paying back an ex-partner. Try not to let the mood you are in affect the arrangements, leaving your child not knowing what to expect.
- Your child is very tuned into your state of mind. You need to be honest with yourself about the messages you are conveying to them. For instance, if you feel uncertain or unhappy about visits, your child may not feel free to come and go or be able to benefit from the contact with their other parent.
- Financial insecurity may lead to short tempers, anxiety, nagging and hostility that is hard to conceal from children, but do try.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets  
*Fathers*  
*Grandparents and the extended family*

## How children come to terms with separation

Children usually wish that their parents would stay together. Sometimes they try to bring them together again by being very good. Younger children may imagine that it will all go back to how it was if they think and behave in a 'magically' good way.

Children develop by becoming able to face difficult experiences and they learn from seeing how *you* struggle through. Even if your child is having problems, it doesn't necessarily mean things are going badly. It may be that they are struggling hard and will come through well in the end.

Loss from separation and divorce is different

from loss through death. The family relationships which the child was part of have gone, yet the people themselves are still around in the world leading different lives. Their behaviour can seem selfish and unnecessary to the child.

It may be hard for the child to understand and name what they have lost. They may be confused about whether the loving family they once thought they had ever really existed at all.

## What children need to know

You don't need to tell your child all the details about the breakdown of the relationship with your ex-partner, but it is important for them to know the facts about their future. For instance:

- when they will see their other parent and their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins
- whether they will be moving house or changing schools.

You may feel tempted to persuade one, or all, of your children to take your side against your ex-partner. This is not in the child's best interests. They may well feel disloyal whatever they do and it makes it more difficult for them to sort out their own feelings.

## How children express their feelings

Your children may need to fill *you* with all the anger, doubts and helplessness they feel overwhelmed by themselves. It is easier for them to cope when they are able to make their suffering clear and to feel confident that their needs will go on being met. It may feel to you as if they are telling you that everything you try to do is wrong, but it is their way of asking you to help them.

For most parents, their children's anger and sense of betrayal is far too close to what they are feeling themselves and this is difficult to manage. Sadly, children may feel that not only have they lost the parent who has gone, but that the one who has stayed with them is terribly changed.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets  
*Separations and changes in the early years*

Children, like adults, react in their own way to stress and unhappiness. Their reactions are likely to be different at different ages:

### *Under five*

Young children normally experience anxiety when they are separated from a parent. This anxiety usually shows itself in crying, clinging and difficult behaviour. With the additional stress of family break-up, you must expect the child to find separations and changes even harder to manage. They may show great reluctance to leave you for a contact visit, and then have a tantrum when it is time to say goodbye to their other parent at the end of the visit. This is distressing for everyone, although it is natural in the circumstances.

### *Middle childhood*

Children aged between about six and eleven years old have a better understanding of what is happening, but are not able to deal with the conflict of loyalty the separation stirs up. They may even blame themselves and have feelings of guilt. They need you to accept that they are in turmoil and to understand that they may take this out on those around them before their life begins to settle down again. School can sometimes be a haven for the child but you need to be patient if they are not coping as well as they did with friends and school.

### *Adolescence*

This is an important time for sorting out a young person's sense of themselves, their identity. For an adolescent, their parents' separation makes them feel insecure just as they are wanting to start to separate themselves from their families as part of their normal development. Adolescents also feel guilty too, because they feel that they have caused the separation. Some teenagers deal with this by a sudden angry rush towards independence, as a way of not facing what is happening at home. For others, the uncertainty may pull them back into the family. It is important for adolescents to have contact with the parent of the same sex.

The child who makes little fuss and withdraws into themselves is the one to be most concerned about. You should take special care to offer a child like this as much time and consideration as you would if they were more obviously having problems. If you are in doubt as to how concerned you should be, you may find it helpful to talk to your child's teacher or your GP or health visitor as to whether you should seek further help.

Whatever the age of your child at the time of the separation and their reaction at the time, it is something they will continue to sort out in their minds in different ways as they grow up. So be prepared for difficulties to resurface whenever there are changes and uncertainties to be managed.

### **Discipline**

Children probably experience a lot of inconsistency from distressed, preoccupied adults during the separation. As a result, discipline is likely to become a much more difficult issue than before.

You may feel anxious about what your children are allowed to do when they are with your ex-partner or you may discover that your own new partner looks at the matter of discipline in a different way. Try not to take this situation out on the children. Parents need to understand that they have a responsibility to sort it out.

Parents can sometimes lose their sense of proportion about discipline and behaviour



when they are anxious about the possible effects of the separation on the children. They may see good behaviour chiefly as a reassurance that the children have not suffered, or they may become more intolerant of bad behaviour because of the worry and guilt it stirs up.

## Stepfamilies

When families break up, it is often to form new families. If you have a new partner, you hope to build a new future for your family together.

You need to remember that you are asking a lot of your children just when they are trying to manage the loss of one parent. They have to:

- learn to cope with the new adult who seems to have taken mum or dad's place
- get to know step-grandparents, step-brothers and sisters and, of course, babies born of the new relationship

- sort out old loyalties and new jealousies
- get used to different ways of doing things and new living arrangements, such as shared bedrooms.

Even for very young children, it is important to be clear that your new partner doesn't automatically become a new mum or dad. Such a close relationship can only grow in time – and then only if a step-parent and step-child really do have a feeling for one another. It is better in the meantime to accept that a certain distance is inevitable and more respectful for all concerned.

Your ex-partner also does not want to feel that someone else has taken their place as dad or mum. If you take things slowly, it may be possible to sort out an arrangement with which everyone feels comfortable.



Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets  
*Sibling rivalry*

## Points to remember

- Be available for your child
- Your child needs time, space and privacy to sort out their feelings about your relationship.
- You may feel your relationship with your ex-partner is irreconcilable, but your child needs to rebuild their picture of a loved mother and father. This is much easier if it was once a loving relationship than if you were always unhappy together. Your child has to struggle with this on their own. You can love your children and look after them while they work this out, but you can't do it for them.
- Children often blame themselves for a divorce, especially if they have been naughty or feel they have tried to monopolise one parent. You need to tell them that it was not their fault.
- If you are preoccupied with your new life, you may also expect your child to put the past behind them. But starting again is not an option for your child. It may place a great barrier between you and your child if you convey to them your excitement about starting again. It may not feel like this to your child.
- If parents find new partners, and perhaps start new families, it can seem to the children of the original family that they are no longer your primary concern and that they are the only ones paying the price of the failed relationship.
- In the early days after the separation, children find it easier if parents conduct their new social and sexual lives when they are not around.
- If possible, allow time for your child to adjust to the separation before introducing something or someone new to cope with.
- Be prepared to take your child seriously if they are not ready for the next step.

## Further help – organisations

### YoungMinds Parents' Information Service

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person

Phone 0800 018 2138

Web [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

### Parentline

Support and advice for anyone parenting a child

Phone 0808 800 2222

Textphone 0800 783 6783

Web [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

### Gingerbread

Information and support for lone parent families in England and Wales

Phone 0800 018 4318

Email [office@gingerbread.org.uk](mailto:office@gingerbread.org.uk)

Web [www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

### National Council for One Parent Families

Promotes the welfare of lone parents and their children

Phone 0800 018 5026

Email [info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk](mailto:info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk)

Web [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk)

### National Association of Child Contact Centres

Keeps children in touch with both parents through a network of child contact centres

Information line 0845 4500280

9am to 1pm Monday to Friday

Email [contact@nacc.org.uk](mailto:contact@nacc.org.uk)

Web [www.nacc.org.uk](http://www.nacc.org.uk)

### National Family Mediation

Network of over 60 local not-for-profit family mediation services in England and Wales, offering help to couples who are in the process of separation and divorce

Phone 01179 904 2825

Email [general@nfm.org.uk](mailto:general@nfm.org.uk)

Web [www.nfm.u-net.com](http://www.nfm.u-net.com)

### Parenting Plan

The *Parenting Plan*, produced by the Lord Chancellor's Department, provides information and guidance for those going through the process of separation and divorce. For a copy of the booklet please contact:

Department of Constitutional Affairs,  
FREEPOST, PO Box 2001, Burgess Hill,  
West Sussex RH15 8BR

Web [www.dca.gov.uk/family/leaflets/parentplan](http://www.dca.gov.uk/family/leaflets/parentplan)

### Relate

Relationship counselling organisation

Helpline 0845 130 4010

Monday to Friday 9.30am to 4.30pm

Email [enquiries@relate.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@relate.org.uk)

Web [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

**There are likely to be similar useful organisations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.**

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### The Understanding Childhood

series of leaflets can be viewed and printed free from

[www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

An order form to buy printed copies is available from the site.

## Parenting Plan

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### Planning your children's future

#### Children:

- Need to feel involved in planning for their future.
- Should be helped to maintain the best possible relationship with both parents.
- In most cases, need to keep in regular contact with each parent.
- Need love and care given in a consistent and predictable way.
- Benefit from stability - in relationships with family and friends, in living environment, in school, in clubs and activities.
- Find change - even small changes - hard.
- Need clear and honest explanations, and information appropriate to their age, about what is happening and why.
- Need opportunities to express their views, and should be listened to. However, they should not be forced to express a view (for example which parent they prefer to live with) or made to feel that the responsibility for any decisions rests with them.
- Need their views to be taken into account before any final decisions are made. If decisions are made against their wishes, this should be acknowledged and the reason for doing so explained to them.
- Need to know their family history, origins and relationships in order to have a clear sense of belonging.
- Usually want to keep in touch with their wider family (brothers and sisters, stepfamily, aunts, grandparents, etc) and family friends.
- Need to know how they can keep in touch with people they care about, for example by contact visits, letters, phone, e-mail, video/audio tapes.
- May feel insecure about their parents' new relationships, if and when they occur. It is important to introduce new long-term partners sensitively.

**Each child's needs are different, and arrangements for one child may not be appropriate for their brother or sister. Needs change as children grow up and as your circumstances change. Try to look ahead and discuss the impact of change together, and with your children, before difficulties occur.**



## Parenting Plan

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### Some important points about contact visits



- Contact arrangements should be discussed with your children and their needs and wishes taken into account.
- There is no right set of arrangements that will suit everyone.
- Contact visits are meant to be enjoyable, but they can be stressful at first, for all concerned. They are worth persevering with, because they can benefit you all.
- It is helpful for children to have a regular pattern of contact visits.
- The pattern for contact visits should be established as soon after separation as possible.
- The best pattern of visits will vary with the age of the child.
- Shorter, more frequent visits may work better for younger children.
- If visits are very short, or very infrequent, it may be difficult for a parent and child to feel relaxed together.
- Overnight stays, where possible, are important in allowing the parent and child to experience ordinary daily routines together.
- Failure by either parent to stick to the arrangements for contact may be distressing for a child and make them feel less secure.
- It is not always helpful to see arrangements after separation as a simple extension of what has gone before - you may wish to do different activities together now, see each other at different times, etc.
- Because emotions are often raw following a separation, it may be difficult for parents to agree on contact arrangements. If there is no practical alternative a contact centre may be used temporarily.
- If a child does not want to go on a contact visit it is important to try to understand why and to discuss this with those involved.



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## Communicating with each other, and with your children



Discussing changes in your family situation can benefit you and your children. It can help avoid misunderstandings and friction between you as parents. It will show your children that they continue to be important to you. Clear communication will also help make the changes run as smoothly as possible.

### WHEN DISCUSSING CHANGES WITH EACH OTHER

- Think about when, where and how often you are going to discuss things.
- Respect each other's views.
- Support each other as parents in, for example, discipline or the children's education.
- Think about your continuing responsibilities as parents, rather than the difficulties of your past relationship.
- Try not to row or criticise each other in front of your children.
- Remember that we all make mistakes, and just because one particular topic provokes a row, it does not mean that you should give up talking altogether.

### WHEN DISCUSSING CHANGES WITH YOUR CHILDREN

- Make time to talk to each child separately, as well as together.
- Show your children that you support each other as parents, even though you can no longer live together.
- Use words and ways of talking that don't show blame.
- Explain your plans clearly and what effects these will have, and listen carefully to your children's views.
- Reassure your children wherever possible.
- Remember that each child is different, and will react in their own way to your separation or divorce.

### ABOVE ALL, DISCUSS ARRANGEMENTS WITH YOUR CHILDREN AND LISTEN TO THEIR VIEWS.



## Parenting Plan

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### Conclusions



PLEASE NOTE: If you are filling this in on a computer, you will not be able to save your entries. Once completed, PRINT OUT this page before moving onto the next page.

This Plan has been read and discussed by us as parents and with our children, and we sign to indicate our commitment to it. As things change over the years we will hope to discuss matters in a similar way, discussing any changes with our children as appropriate.

5.4

Mother	<input type="text"/>	Father	<input type="text"/>
	Signature		Signature
	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Date	<input type="text"/>	Date	<input type="text"/>

The Plan can also be signed by other people if you think it will help everyone to feel committed to what has been discussed - your children, a step-parent, grandparent etc.

Name	<input type="text"/>	Name	<input type="text"/>
Signature	<input type="text"/>	Signature	<input type="text"/>
Relationship	<input type="text"/>	Relationship	<input type="text"/>
Date	<input type="text"/>	Date	<input type="text"/>
Name	<input type="text"/>	Name	<input type="text"/>
Signature	<input type="text"/>	Signature	<input type="text"/>
Relationship	<input type="text"/>	Relationship	<input type="text"/>
Date	<input type="text"/>	Date	<input type="text"/>

We acknowledge that each of us remains a parent and we are jointly responsible for the welfare and development of each child. We are responsible for the day-to-day care, control and discipline of each of our children while they are in our immediate care.

Who will look after this plan?

Who will have a copy of this plan?

When do you plan to consider revisions?





## My Family's Splitting Up



### How do you feel?

It may help to think about why you feel the way you do. Below, list three of the feelings that you ticked on the previous page and write down why you think you have felt/are feeling this way.

You could also use this list to help you to talk about your feelings with someone else.

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ **because** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ **because** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ **because** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## My Family's splitting up



### How do you feel?

This page can be used to say why you think other members of your family are feeling the way they are.

**Dad feels**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Mum feels**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5.4



NOTE: This leaflet is designed to be used as part of a wider conversation with your practitioner. If you want to take an online course for parents, visit [www.inourplace.co.uk](http://www.inourplace.co.uk).

## Factsheet Useful addresses

### Association for Shared Parenting

PO Box 2000  
Dudley  
West Midlands  
Tel: 01789 750891  
[www.sharedparenting.org.uk](http://www.sharedparenting.org.uk)

### Childline

Weston House  
42 Curtain Road  
London EC2A 3NH  
Tel: 00800 1111  
[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### Family and Parenting Institute

Factsheets and information on a range of topics  
430 Highgate Studios  
53-79 Highgate Road  
London NW5 1TL  
Tel: 020 7424 3460  
[www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)

### Children's Legal Centre

University of Essex  
Wivenhoe Park  
Colchester  
Essex CO4 3SQ  
Tel: 01206 873820  
[www.childrenslegalcentre.com](http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com)

### It's not your fault

Action for Children the children's charity: practical information for children, young people and parents going through a family break-up.  
85 Highbury Park  
London N5 1UD  
Tel: 08457 626579  
[www.itsnotyourfault.org.uk](http://www.itsnotyourfault.org.uk)

### National Family Mediation

For family mediation  
Margaret Jackson Centre  
4 Barnfield Hill  
Exeter, Devon EX1 1SR  
Tel: 0300 4000 636  
[www.nfm.org.net](http://www.nfm.org.net)

### Families Need Fathers

134 Curtain Road  
London EC2A 3AR  
Tel: 0207613 5060  
[www.fnf.org.uk](http://www.fnf.org.uk)

### National Youth Advocacy Service

For children and young people  
Egerton House  
Tower Road  
Birkenhead, Wirral  
Merseyside CH41 1FN  
Tel: 0800 616101  
[www.nyas.net](http://www.nyas.net)

### Gingerbread

For lone parents and children  
255 Kentish Town Road  
London NW5 2LX  
Tel: 0808 802 0925  
[www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)

### Parentline Plus now Family Lives

For all the family/step family  
CAN Mezzanine  
49-51 East Road  
London N1 6AH  
Tel: 0808 800 2222  
[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

### Grandparents' Federation

Moot House  
The Stow, Harlow  
Essex CM20 3AG  
Tel: 01279 428040

## Relate

Herbert Gray College  
Little Church Street  
Rugby CV21 3AP  
Tel: 01788 573241  
[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

## MATCH

Mothers Apart from Their Children  
c/o BM Problems  
London WC1N 3XX  
E-mail: [enquiries@match1979.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@match1979.co.uk)  
[www.matchmothers.org](http://www.matchmothers.org)

## Resolution (formerly Solicitors' Family Law Association)

PO Box 302  
Orpington  
Kent BR6 8QX  
Tel: 01689 850227  
E-mail: [info@resolution.org.uk](mailto:info@resolution.org.uk)  
[www.resolution.org.uk](http://www.resolution.org.uk)

## National Association of Child Contact Centres

A network of safe places where children of separated families can spend time with one or both parents  
1 Heritage Mews  
High Pavement NG1 1HN  
Tel: 0845 4500280  
E-mail: [contact@nacc.org.uk](mailto:contact@nacc.org.uk)  
[www.nacc.org.uk](http://www.nacc.org.uk)

## TheSite.org

For young adults: factsheets and articles on key issues  
[www.thesite.org.uk](http://www.thesite.org.uk)

## Helplines

**Childline** – 0800 1111

**Children's Legal Centre** – 0800 802 0008

**Cruse Bereavement** – Daytime helpline: 0844 477 9400

Young person's freephone helpline: 0808 808 1677

**Care Get connected** (young people) – 0808 808 4994

**Gingerbread** – 0808 802 0925

**Grandparents' Federation** – 01279 428090

**One Parent Families** – 0800 018 5026

**National Council for One Parent Families** – 0800 0185026

**National Youth Advocacy Service** – 0800 616101

**NSPCC** – 0800 800 5000

**Parentline Plus now Family Lives** – 0808 800 2222

**Samaritans** – 08459 909090

**Who Cares?** – [www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk](http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk)

**Youth Access** – [www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)