

Separation and Divorce: A Guide for Parents



Highlights

When you're going through a relationship breakdown, it's important to look after the mental and physical health of both you and your child.

If you're separating from your partner, you should tell your child in a sensitive way and give them lots of reassurance that they are loved by you both and that the separation is not their fault.

A counsellor or mediator can help draw up a parenting plan to guide how you and the other parent will care for your child.

Once you have agreed on co-parenting arrangements, speak to your child simply and clearly about the new routine.

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How can I look after myself?

If you're part of a couple that's separating or divorcing, you may feel:

anger
fear
confusion
guilt
rejection

Separation can be complicated, especially if you have children. There are ways to work through it with minimal distress. Regardless of your family situation, it's important to know that you can still be a successful parent. To help you support your child through this difficult time, you first need to look after yourself.

If you're feeling helpless, there are things you can do to regain control of your life:

Do things that make you feel better - go for a walk, take a long bath, listen to relaxing music.

Talk to your friends and family - having a social life can help you work through your grief.

Be patient - it takes time to heal.

You can also see a counsellor, psychologist, or doctor if you are:

concerned about your mental health
struggling with strong emotions

How do I talk to my child about separation?

Telling your child about separation is not easy.

It's a good idea to do this before you and your partner separate. Choose a time when you're both calm. Support each other when telling your child - try not to blame anyone.

Your child may react in different ways. They may:

be surprised or confused
feel sadness or grief
be worried, stressed, or afraid

It's important to let them talk about their feelings.

It's a good idea to reassure your child that:

it's okay for them to show their feelings
you will always be their parents and will always love them
they're not to blame

How do I sort out parenting after a separation?

If you're separating from your partner, you should talk about shared care, or co-parenting, of your child. This might include agreeing on:

living arrangements
contact and communication
important occasions - such as birthdays, school holidays, and celebrations

To make co-parenting work, you will need to think about things such as:

how your child will manage school and get to after-school activities
where to keep your child's belongings
how to schedule birthday parties
who is going to receive correspondence and invitations

You can use a shared online calendar with your former partner to help with organization and communication.

Parenting plans

A parenting plan is a written and signed agreement between both parents about the care of the children. It covers practical issues and responsibilities.

Making a parenting plan is cheaper and less stressful than going to court. However, it's not legally enforceable.

If you need help to write a parenting plan, you can:

talk to a counsellor or mediator

get help from a family relationships centre or a family dispute resolution practitioner

If you can't agree with your former partner, you may need to go to court to apply for a legally enforceable parenting order.

Living arrangements

It can be hard to decide where your child will live, and how living arrangements are to be shared.

If your child is very young, you and your partner will need to decide for them. If they're old enough to talk about their thoughts and feelings, their wishes should be considered.

Keeping a checklist handy of everything your child will need when they go to the other parent's house will help at handover time, when tensions can run high and it's easy to forget things.

It's a good idea to keep a set of basic clothes and toiletries in both homes, like:

pyjamas

underwear

school uniforms

runners

Some items will usually need to travel with your child, like:

school books

sports equipment

musical instruments

Contact and communication

Both you and your child might feel sad and lonely while you're apart.

You should try to agree on what contact you will have with your child while they're with the other parent, such as:

- a quick phone call
- text messages

Plan to do things for yourself that you enjoy while they're away.

Important occasions

Birthdays and holidays can be difficult to manage. Some parents:

- split the day in half
- alternate the day each year
- celebrate separately at different times

It's a good idea to tell the other parent what presents you're buying, so you don't double up.

You can also plan for things like health visits or school concerts. If you're not on good terms with your former partner, it's a good idea to plan who is going to go and what you'll do if you both turn up.

You can ask your child's preschool or school to send your former partner duplicates of every note. This can keep them up to date with what's going on.

How can I help my child adjust to the new arrangements?

There are things you can do to help your child adjust to life after separation.

Communicate clearly

Once you have agreed on the arrangements, explain them to your child. Tell them:

- when they will be in each home

who will be looking after them
when you will see them again
that the amount of time they spend with each parent isn't about who loves the child the most

Speak clearly, simply, and truthfully. It can help if you encourage your child to talk to another trusted adult.

Keep to routines

If possible, try to follow similar routines in each household. Your child will feel more secure if they're able to:

- follow the same bedtime routine
- have play dates
- go to their regular activities

If the rules are different in each house, explain them clearly so your child knows what is expected of them.

Give them their own space

Help your child to feel at home by giving them some space of their own.

If they don't have their own room, let them put up pictures or store some toys.

If a younger child has a special toy or blanket, make sure it travels with them between homes.

Ease the transitions

Some children have trouble switching between different homes. They may not want to go to one parent's house.

It can help to arrange the handover at a time of day when your child isn't too tired or hungry.

When your child comes back to your home, it might take them a little while to

unwind. You can help them feel comfortable by:

- doing something together that you both enjoy
- eating a special meal
- going to the park
- looking at the calendar to plan the days ahead

Be flexible

As your child grows up, things will change. You may need more flexibility to manage their:

- school
- social life
- after-school activities
- work

You can also be flexible by:

- always having alternative arrangements in case something goes wrong
- trying not to get upset when plans change

Tools And Assistance

You don't have to deal with everything on your own. Get help if you need it.

For more information about separation and support for you and your child, you can:

- reach out to a family support organization
- ask your doctor for advice and a referral to a psychologist
- contact a counselling service