



Parenting Apart

Messages for Parents

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About this booklet

Research tells us that children thrive with warm, reliable, co-operative parenting – whether parents live together or live apart. We also know that there can sometimes be particular challenges for separated parents.

This booklet will give you some ideas about how you and your children's other parent can put your children first and move forward positively.

Safety

Some of these ideas may not fit your situation if you have concerns about your own safety or the safety of your children. This might be due to violence or abuse, alcohol or substance misuse, or other issues. Professional advice and help is recommended, see resources on our website www.relationships-scotland.org.uk/family-support.

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What Do Children Need to Hear?

It can be difficult for children when their parents separate. During or after a separation, parents often worry about how it will affect their children, and many express concern about saying or doing something that makes things worse.

This section will give you some ideas about what your children need to hear to help them cope with the changes.



It is important that your children know that they are not at fault.

It wasn't your fault!

Your children need to hear that it was nothing that they did or said that led to the decision to separate. Children can sometimes take on the responsibility for the separation, so it is important that they know that it was an adult decision and that they are not at fault.

We have decided that...

Your children need to hear an explanation about the decision that you and their Mum or Dad have made. How you explain will depend upon their age and emotional maturity. Although it is important to be honest, your children do not need to hear the details of adult issues or be put in a position of choosing who is in the right.

Where possible, it can be helpful to speak to your children together with their other parent. If this isn't possible then try to agree what you are both going to say so that your children get similar messages.

We still feel the same way about you

Your children need to hear that, although the feelings that you and their Mum or Dad have towards each other have changed, the feelings that you both have for them have not. Let them know that you both still love them and that it is OK for your children to still love you and their other parent.

I'm OK

Your children need to hear that, although it is difficult at the moment, you and their other parent are going to be OK. They need to know that you are both going to be able to look after yourselves and, in turn, still be their Mum or Dad.



Let your children know that it is OK for them to still love you and their other parent.

The plan is...

Your children need to hear that you and their other parent have thought about what is going to happen.

- **Where are they going to stay?**
- **What about school?**
- **What about their grandparents or other family members and their friends?**
- **What can stay the same?**
- **What is going to be different?**

They also need to hear that you and their other parent have thought about how they will continue to spend time with each of you.

- **When will they see each of you?**
- **How will they be able to get in touch with each of you when you are not with them?**



Outline the plan for them and take their questions into consideration.

You might not know all the answers immediately – be honest about this and explain that you will let them know as soon as you can.

What do you think about...?

Your children need to hear that you want to know their views about the separation. Let them know that you don't want them to make decisions but you do want to take their views into account when you and their other parent make plans.

How do you feel about...?

Your children also need to hear that you are interested in how they feel. It is OK to feel angry or sad or relieved, or anything else. You are there to LISTEN and help.



Let your children know that you don't want them to make decisions but you do want to take their views into account.

We will work together...

Your children need to hear that you and their other parent will work together, if at all possible, to make things OK for them. It helps if you and their other parent talk respectfully and resolve disagreements calmly. Although you might not get everything right, let them know that you will try your best to make the situation easier for them.



It helps if you and their other parent talk respectfully and resolve disagreements calmly.

It takes time

Your children need to hear that you realise that the changes may take some time for everyone to get used to. They may need time to think about things. Let them know that this is OK and you will both be there for them when they want to talk.



Your children may need time to think about things.



What Helps?

Research shows that parents can really help their children cope with the changes that can arise during and after separation.

This section will give you some ideas about how you and your children's other parent can help your children adjust.



Children benefit from positive relationships with both parents, wherever safe and possible.

Support your children's relationship with their other parent

When an adult relationship ends, it can be difficult not to let your feelings get in the way of your children's relationship with their other parent. Children benefit from positive relationships with both parents, wherever safe and possible. It is important for them to know that you are OK with this and that you support them having a good relationship with their other parent.

Work together

Imagine that your ex-partner is a work colleague - this can help you separate out your feelings towards them as an ex-partner from your feelings towards them as a parent. Focus on the important business of working together to bring up your children, jointly planning for your children's lives and supporting each other as parents. Before making significant decisions that concern your child, consult their other parent where possible, so that workable arrangements can be made.

Make a plan

Children need to know what is happening in their lives. You might want to prepare a parenting plan. This will help you to focus on a number of different areas. Parenting plans are unique to your situation but could include agreements about living arrangements, keeping in touch with wider family and friends, school, holidays and other special days, health issues, money matters and communication.

Try to keep conversations about money matters separate from conversations about the time your children spend with each of you.

It can be helpful to keep some things the same for your children, particularly when they are trying to cope with the changes that separation can bring.



Be clear

Don't assume that you both have the same understanding about an agreement or a parenting plan. Be clear about the details – you might even want to write some things down. This can help to avoid misunderstandings and arguments.

Arrangements

Whether parents live together or apart, the time that children spend with each parent varies between families. What happens after a separation depends on a lot of factors, such as what your relationship was like with your children prior to living apart, the age of your children and how far apart you live. Arrangements should take into account what is best for your children.

There are lots of other ways to keep in touch with your children when they are not with you – letters, cards, phone calls, texts, emails, Facetime/Skype, or record yourself reading a story so that they can listen to it at bedtime.



It is important that children don't feel like they are being asked to take sides or make the decisions...

Review

Children's needs change as they grow and develop, and other circumstances might change for you or your child's other parent. It is important to agree how you are going to review and make adjustments to your plan and arrangements.

Children's views

It can be helpful for your children to have the opportunity to share their views with you before you and their other parent make significant decisions that affect them. However it is important that children don't feel like they are being asked to take sides or make the decisions themselves. Parents make the final decision.



Their own space

It is important for children to feel that they have a home with each parent if they are spending time in both homes. This includes having their own space. In many families it won't be practical for them to have their own room, but it could mean that they have a space within a room to call their own.

Parenting Styles

Parents can have different parenting styles and values whether they are living together or apart. For example, parents might think differently about how much time children are allowed to spend watching T.V. or bedtimes.

It can be helpful to try to agree together what you would like to be the same for your children and what can be different. Children can cope with differences as long as each parent is consistent. It is helpful if you can respect the other parent's household rules and encourage your children to respect them too.



Children can cope with differences as long as each parent is consistent.

Positive moves

Sometimes children can find it unsettling when they move from spending time with one parent to spending time with the other parent. They might pick up on your feelings and be worried about you. Parents who live apart can help their children to manage these times. Think through how you can make this happen and agree on how you are both going to make this a positive experience for your children.

Put yourself in your children's shoes

How will your children feel if

- **They hear you criticise their Mum or Dad in front of them?**
- **You ask them to pass on an angry message to their Mum or Dad?**
- **You ask them intrusive questions about their Mum or Dad?**
- **They have to hide their feelings about their Mum or Dad?**
- **You don't turn up to see them or are very late?**
- **You and their other parent argue in front of them a lot of the time?**



Communication and Conflict

One of the challenges for parents who live apart is finding a way to talk with their ex-partner about parenting issues. Initially it can seem like every conversation is a difficult one! You and your children's other parent might be finding it difficult to make arrangements for your children and you might be arguing a lot.

This section will give you some ideas about how to communicate positively with your children's other parent.



Finding ways to communicate constructively with your ex-partner can really help your children adjust to the separation.

Why is it important to think about communication and conflict?

Every family has arguments and has to learn how to manage disagreements; it is part of family life. Research tells us that whether parents live together or apart, conflict can have a negative impact on their children if conflicts are frequent, unresolved, intense or physical.

It can be particularly difficult for children if they think that they are the cause of the arguments or they feel 'caught in the middle'. Finding ways to communicate constructively with your ex-partner can really help your children adjust to the separation.



It can be particularly difficult for children if they feel 'caught in the middle'.



Conflict and separation

Conflict between parents can be about different things. After a separation there can be many feelings about the end of the relationship - sadness, anger, frustration, relief, guilt - and lots more! It can be helpful to try to separate your feelings about the end of the relationship from how you feel towards your ex-partner as a parent. You and your ex-partner don't have to like each other - you just need to find a way of working together for your children.

Plan

It can be helpful to arrange a mutually suitable time to have a conversation, whether on the phone or in person. Avoid having difficult conversations with your ex-partner in front of your children, or if you are concerned that you or your ex-partner will be angry or even if you are just tired, hungry or upset!

Arrange a time and a place that suits you both to have the conversation. Some parents find it helpful to make appointments to meet each other regularly to discuss parenting issues. Be clear about what you want to say but also be ready to listen to the other parent's views. If you are worried that the conversation will become an argument, try meeting in a café as it can be easier to keep calm in a public place.

It might seem easier to use email or text to make arrangements to avoid talking directly or seeing your ex-partner face to face. These can be useful in some circumstances, but it is important to remember that texts or email can easily be misinterpreted and lead to misunderstandings.

Listen

Try to really listen to what your ex-partner has to say. Try not to interrupt or plan what you are going to say next while they are still talking.

Take a moment

Try not to react immediately to something that has happened or has been said – take a moment. It is OK to ask for some time to think about a suggestion or respond to a comment. You might want to agree in advance how you are going to let the other person know that you want to 'pause' or 'hold' conversations that are getting out of hand, perhaps with a particular phrase or signal.



Be clear about what you want to say but also be ready to listen to the other parent's views.



What do you want to be different?

Identify how you would like things to be in the future for your children and focus on working together to achieve that. Remember there may be a number of different solutions to the problem you are discussing. Try not to be fixed upon your own ideas, be creative and be prepared to compromise.

One issue at a time

Focus on the parenting issues that need to be resolved and try to stick to one thing at a time. It can be easy to get distracted onto other issues that are not related to parenting, particularly if there are unresolved feelings about the separation. Some parents find it helpful to write down what they want to discuss. Try to start with something positive, perhaps something that you know you agree about or something positive about the children.

Focus on what you can control, not what you can't

You can't control your ex-partner's behaviour and you aren't responsible for changing their behaviour. The only person you can change is yourself. This can be challenging if your ex-partner chooses to be hostile towards you or to criticise you in front of your children. Try to remain businesslike and think about what you can do or say to try to have a helpful conversation with your ex-partner.

Helpful conversations

People experience things differently and it may not be useful to get into an argument about what really happened. It can be helpful to state clearly how an action makes you feel and what would help.

- I feel. . . (how you feel when an action takes place)
- When. . . (what the action was – without blaming or criticising).
- I would find it helpful if. . .

For example a critical conversation is:

'You said you would be back at 6.30, you're never on time. If you can't be on time you won't have her next week.'

A helpful conversation could be:

'I feel worried and frustrated when you're late bringing Julie back – she was due back at 6.30, it's now 7.30. I would find it helpful if you could call if you are going to be late.'

Other perspectives

Try to think about how things are from the other parent's perspective and to understand their view. How would you feel if you were them? What would you want to happen if you were in their shoes? Think about your children's views too. Imagine your ex-partner as a work colleague and speak respectfully, even if this isn't how you feel. Avoid judgemental statements, personal attacks and name calling.



Words to avoid

Try to avoid using 'always' or 'never' when you are describing the situation. It is rarely the case that someone 'never' does something, or is 'always' late, for example. These words tend to lead to the other person becoming defensive - they will try to think of a time when they WERE on time or they DID do what had been expected.



Try to think about how things are from the other parent's perspective and to understand their view.



Keep up-to-date

Parents who live together often share information about their children's school, health and activities without really knowing they are doing this. When parents live apart it can be harder to keep up-to-date with things that are important to their children – this can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or arguments.

Try to communicate directly with your ex-partner as children can find it difficult to act as a messenger or go-between. Work out what your children need you both to know and agree a practical way of keeping each other up-to-date. This might feel a bit awkward but your children will appreciate you both trying to remember the things that are important to them.

End on a positive note

If you think that the conversation might be deteriorating into an argument – stop. Recognise the issues that you have managed to agree on and acknowledge that the conversation is becoming unhelpful – without blaming or criticising the other parent. Suggest that you both speak again at another time.



If you think that the conversation might be deteriorating into an argument – stop.



Families Come in All Shapes and Sizes

When parents separate, children may have many changes to cope with. They can sometimes feel that their family has changed a lot and has become very different from other families. Often children whose parents separate also have to cope with their parents forming new relationships.

This section will give you some ideas about how to help your children understand that families come in all shapes and sizes.



You can help your children to cope with the separation by supporting positive relationships.



Supporting positive relationships

It can be helpful to keep some things the same for your children, particularly when they are trying to cope with the changes that separation can bring. Children may have a very positive relationship with their grandparents or other family members and might be worried that they won't be able to see them as often. As parents, you can help your children to cope with the separation by supporting these positive relationships.

Take your time

It can be exciting to start a new relationship and you might be keen that your children are part of this. It can help if you take your time to get to know the new partner in your life and think carefully about whether this new relationship is serious before you introduce them to your children. Children may become attached to your new partner and if the relationship doesn't last this can be another loss for your children to cope with. This will also give you the chance to make sure that it is OK for your new partner to be around your children.



Give your children time to adjust

It is important to think about whether your children are ready to be introduced to a new partner. Remember their timescale may be different from yours. A new partner may mean a new beginning for you, but for your children it might be a reminder that you and their Mum or Dad are not going to get back together. If your children have recently had to cope with lots of changes in their lives, it can help them if you delay introducing them to new partners.

Prepare

Your children may be keen to know whether you are seeing someone or not. Remember children can often see through “we are just good friends”! It is better to be prepared to answer their questions honestly. You will be the best judge of how much they need to know. They might find it helpful to know that you are spending time with someone and that if the relationship were to become more serious, you would let them know. They might need some reassurance that, although you are spending time with someone else, it doesn't change how you feel about them.



Your children might need some reassurance that, although you are spending time with someone else, it doesn't change how you feel about them.



Your children's other parent

It can be helpful to discuss introducing your new partner to your children, with their other parent. This can be an opportunity to provide reassurance about parenting roles. Depending upon how your relationship ended this may be difficult. However it is important that your children know that they are allowed to talk about your new partner with you and their other parent. Both of you can then be alert to changes in your children's behaviour and be able to offer them support in managing this change.

Your children have their own thoughts and feelings

Your children need your help to keep *their feelings* separate from *your feelings*. While you may have a new partner whom you think is great, your children may not think or feel the same way. They may need some time to get to know your new partner. You can help them by giving them space and trying to listen to how they feel and what they think.

Maybe your children's other parent has a new partner and you are struggling to come to terms with how you feel about this. You can help by trying to keep your feelings separate from your children's and let them know that it is OK for them to like their Mum or Dad's new partner.



You can help by trying to keep your feelings separate from your children's.

Spending time with your children

Your children may resent having to share the time that they have with you with your new partner, or they may worry that you will love your new partner more than them. Your new partner may have children that you spend time with, or you and your new partner may have a child together. This can be difficult for children. It can help to reassure your children if you plan to spend time regularly with them on their own.



It can help to reassure your children if you plan to spend time regularly with them on their own.

Families come in all shapes and sizes

It can take time for children to get used to a new partner and other children, and vice versa. It is important that this is not rushed and everyone is given space and time to get to know each other. Whatever shape or size your family is, supporting healthy relationships between your children and the adults in their lives is important. Whether you are a Mum or a Dad or a new partner, try to speak positively to your children about the other adults and children in their lives.



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Support

Sometimes parents can find it difficult to make arrangements for their children with their ex-partner or talk about parenting issues. They might be finding it difficult to come to terms with the breakdown of their relationship or they might be worried about the impact of separation on their children. It's OK to ask for help.

Relationships Scotland's network of Member Services supports individuals, couples and families experiencing conflict and relationship difficulties across all of mainland and island Scotland. This support includes family mediation, counselling, child contact centres and other family support services.

Some Services also provide support directly to children and young people affected by separation such as meeting with children and young people as part of the mediation process, children and young people's counselling and children's groups.

To find out more:

www.relationships-scotland.org.uk



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Parenting Apart

Separating? Divorcing? Living Apart?

It isn't easy for parents or children to go through separation or to live in separate homes. You can help your children by finding out how to put their needs first. Parenting Apart Groups last three hours in total. You and your child's other parent go to different groups. Parenting Apart individual sessions may also be available in some areas.

At a Parenting Apart session you will gain the knowledge you need to:

- Understand what you and your children are going through
- Help your children to cope
- Work together as parents
- Plan for the future

Parenting Apart helps families put their children first and move forward positively when living apart.

To find out more:

www.parentingapart.org.uk

Supported by the Scottish Government through a Strategic Funding Partnership Grant

For more information, videos and resources go to
www.relationships-scotland.org.uk



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