

# Keeping in touch

How to help your child after separation or divorce



# YoungMinds Publications

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## About this booklet

This booklet is mainly for parents who are separating or divorcing, and is based on extensive research into how separation and divorce affect children, and how parents can help their children to cope. It:

- answers questions that parents often ask about how separation can affect children
- explains how children often feel when their parents separate
- makes practical suggestions about how to help them cope

## The rights of the child

It is every child's right to have a relationship with their mother and father. Generally, children get the best start in life if they are loved and cared for by both parents. Because of this the courts require very good reasons for denying a child contact with the parent they no longer live with.

## The effects of separation

Most children - even the very young - are greatly affected if their parents split up. On a practical level separation may mean not only losing a parent but also other changes, such as:

- losing the home and way of life they are used to
- changing school and having to make new friends
- losing touch with old friends, relatives, even pets

Coping with change and unfamiliar routines is not easy for anyone. It is even harder for a child who is struggling to come to terms with family breakdown.

Unspoken feelings of insecurity, sadness, anger, guilt and confusion are very common. Upset feelings like these can affect a child's behaviour at home and at school.

## **The effects of conflict between parents**

Most children feel attached to both parents - even when there has been conflict. They usually wish their parents would just stop fighting and live happily - together or apart.

Parents who fight make their children feel anxious, guilty and helpless. They may feel under pressure to side with one parent or the other, and this can lead to painful conflicts of loyalty. When parents fight, the child feels like an emotional football.

Parents who make the child the focus of their battle harm the child. Arguing over who your child will live with and how often they can see your ex-partner causes them great distress and anxiety. And long drawn-out court proceedings can cause them serious emotional damage.



Above all, children need their parents to stop fighting. If you can put personal differences aside for the sake of your child, you will help enormously. If you can agree about what is in your child's best interest, you will help your child to cope more effectively, protect your child's peace of mind and prevent emotional damage.

## **Is it better for the child to have a 'clean break' from one parent?**

In most, but not all cases, the answer is 'no'. Couples who split up often want to make a clean break and a fresh start - especially if there has been conflict or violence in their relationship. You may hope that a clean break will help everyone forget past unhappiness.

But children, like adults, don't simply forget. In fact they need your help and support to recover from the effects of family breakdown. Children who have suffered emotional damage may also need professional help to get over it.

In most cases children make a better recovery if they carry on their relationship with both their parents after the break-up. If this is not possible the child often loses out.

## What do children gain from contact with both parents?

Ideally children benefit the most from regular contact with both parents. The child who feels loved and cared for by both parents will feel more secure and more valued as a person. A confident, secure child will find it easier to enjoy life, learn, make friends and grow up to form strong and healthy relationships.

Keeping to a regular routine with frequent contact gives younger children a sense of security. It enables older children to build their relationships with their parents and to keep in touch with other important family members.

## The importance of contact with the wider family

Even if their parents have split up, children can still benefit greatly from relationships with other members of the family. Children often say that they can talk about their worries to a grandparent, aunt or cousin, when they can't talk to mum or dad.

Keeping in touch with the wider family and community helps a child to develop:

- an understanding of their family roots
- a secure sense of personal identity
- strong links to their family and culture



## Arranging contact

You should remember that contact with a parent is primarily for the child's benefit and welfare. Arrangements for contact need to reflect this. In order to help your child maintain and build the relationship with your ex-partner, contact must happen regularly and often.

Your child needs to know when it will be possible to see and talk to the parent s/he no longer lives with.

Reliability is vital. Broken arrangements and 'no-shows' make children feel insecure and rejected. This can cause long-lasting emotional damage.

Ideally parents should decide together what will be best for their child. Of course it is important to take the child's wishes and feelings into account - but the responsibility for decisions must rest with the adults.

If you can't agree about arrangements, the court may have to decide for you. An independent expert may be asked to advise the court. This may be a court welfare officer or child psychiatrist.

## Are children harmed if they lose contact with a parent?

This depends on how well they got on before the separation. The child will continue to remember and think about the parent – even if actual contact stops. The bonds linking parent and child are unique and special. It is important to remember and respect this.

Often, when a child has no information about the absent parent s/he fills the gap with wishful thinking. The child may form a mental picture of them which is unrealistic or distorted.

If there is no contact of any kind with the absent parent, a child may suffer emotionally. For example, they may:

- feel rejected or abandoned
- blame themselves and worry about being bad or dangerous
- become withdrawn and depressed
- feel deeply insecure
- feel the rejection is unfair and blame others
- show their anger by arguing or fighting at home and school
- become rebellious or anti-social
- take dangerous risks or harm themselves
- have difficulty in making happy and lasting relationships when they grow up



## What if contact upsets the child?

Even when the child benefits from contact with the absent parent, it can sometimes be unsettling.

Before visits children are often restless and irritable. Waiting for separation from one parent and reunion with the other can make a child feel 'torn apart' inside. Afterwards s/he may feel sad, angry and insecure - and take it out on you.

You can help greatly by keeping calm, listening to your child's worries, and dealing with difficult behaviour in a firm but loving way.

Contact arrangements which do not meet the child's needs can cause more serious upset. They may need changing as the child gets older. From time to time, it is useful to ask questions like:

- are the visits long/short enough?
- are the gaps between meetings too short or too long?
- is the child receiving the care and protection s/he needs?
- is conflict between parents making life too difficult for the child?

If your child continues to show signs of serious upset, expert help may be needed. Your doctor or health visitor will be able to advise and, if necessary, refer you to a family consultation service where you and your child may see a child psychiatrist or child psychologist.

## What if the absent parent cannot provide the care the child needs?

A parent may be too busy, ill, disabled or dangerous to be able to meet their child's needs on their own. S/he may need considerable practical help and support.

If you are worried that your ex-partner may be abusive or violent towards you or your child, it may be possible to arrange for visits to take place somewhere safe, perhaps with another responsible adult present. Visits may need to be supervised or to take place in a Contact Centre where your child's safety can be monitored.

In the last resort the court may have to decide what is best for your child.

If frequent and regular visits are not possible, more limited contact may be. For instance your child may benefit from occasional visits rather than none. Phone calls, letters and gifts are also good ways of keeping in touch and showing your child that you care.

## When contact has to stop

Ideally a child should have contact with the absent parent - unless it is in the child's best interests that contact should stop. For example, if a parent is abusive or suffers from a serious psychiatric disorder, contact may:



- put the child at risk
- prevent the healing of their emotional hurt
- cause further emotional damage

Contact may have to stop for a number of other reasons. For instance a parent may move far away, making the visits too difficult and expensive. Or it may not be possible - even with help - to provide the care and protection the child needs.

If contact has to stop, the visits may need to be phased out gradually so that the child can understand and cope with the change. With time the child's needs and understanding will change. It may be helpful, especially for older children, to have brief contact for a specific purpose, such as getting information about a parent or family member.

## Answering questions

Even if a child cannot see a parent, 'out of sight' is definitely not 'out of mind'. Children often find it helpful if they can talk about the absent parent, ask questions about them, share memories and keep photos and other mementoes of them.

As they get older it is natural for children to ask questions about all sorts of things. It is very likely that your child will want to know more about your ex-partner, why you got together and why you split up. Young people often need to know about their 'roots' and may want to trace a long-lost parent.

Children need to feel able to talk freely to an adult who won't get upset and who can understand their point of view. You should always answer truthfully, taking into account your child's level of understanding. It is also important to respect your child's need to have a good relationship with both parents and both sides of the family.

## Key tips to remember

### **Do**

- *put your child's best interests first*
- *cooperate over childcare and contact arrangements*
- *keep your own disagreements away from your child*

### **Don't**

- *involve your child in your own battles*
- *break agreements about contact with your child*



## Sources of further information

The following **organisations** may be of help:

### ***National Family Mediation***

Alexander House  
Telephone Avenue  
Bristol BS1 5BS

Helpline: 0117 904 2825 (Mon - Fri, 9.30am - 3.00pm.

Answerphone outside of these hours.)

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

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

Offers help to couples who are separating or divorcing. Provides mediators to help negotiate agreements over joint decisions, particularly relating to children. Provides information, including details of contact centres. Branches all over the UK.

### ***Parentline Plus***

Unit 520  
Highate Studios  
53-79 Highgate Road  
London NW5 1TL

Helpline: 0808 800 2222 (24 hours)  
Textphone: 0800 783 6783 (Mon - Fri, 9.00am - 5.00pm)  
Website: [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

Confidential helpline offering support and information to anyone in a parenting role who is experiencing difficulties. Also runs parenting education and support courses.

### ***One Parent Families***

Helpline: 0800 018 5026 (Mon - Fri, 9.00am - 5.00pm)  
Email: [info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk](mailto:info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk)  
Website: [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk)

Provides information and publications for lone parents on issues such as benefits and legal rights. Website includes the lone parent helpdesk which is an interactive information site for lone parents.



You or your child may find the following **books** and **video** useful:

***It's Not the End of the World.***

Bloom, J. (1998). Macmillan children's books.  
ISBN 0-330-398-105. Price: £4.99. Suitable for 9-12 year olds.

***Surviving the Break up: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce.***

Wallerstein, J.S., and Kelly, J.B. (1996).  
USA: Basic books. ISBN 0-465-083-455.

***You're both still my parents (1997).***

Video including parents' booklet.  
For more details, please visit [www.yourebothstillmyparents.com](http://www.yourebothstillmyparents.com)

To obtain further copies of this booklet (ref G02) and other booklets in the series, contact YoungMinds

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