#

# **Helping teenagers adjust after separation or divorce**

The changes and feelings that come with separation or divorce can complicate normal teenage ups and downs. If you and your partner are separating, you can help your teenage child by being open about what’s happening and letting your child know that you both love her/him, no matter what.

###

### **Separation and divorce: your child’s feelings**

If you and your partner are separating, your children might be feeling all kinds of things – just like you. Mixed feelings are normal.

Your children might be confused or even shocked because they didn’t see it coming. They might be sad and anxious because they do not know what will happen next. They might also be relieved, particularly if there has been a lot of conflict or any family violence. Some teenagers might be more relaxed, happier and healthier after a separation. After all, it’s a fresh start for everyone.

It’s also common for teenagers to be concerned or feel guilty if they think they’ve added to the problems between you.

Your children might worry that they’ll lose contact with one of you, even if they don’t say so. Or they might not want contact with one of you because he/she feels angry and blames that parent for the separation.

And your child might think they need to support one or both of you, and feel resentful or overwhelmed by this responsibility.

On a practical level, your children might have concerns about where they’ll live. For example, your children might worry that their home will be sold, and that they might have to move away from their friends and school. The possibility that they’ll have two homes – one with one parent, one with the other – might also worry them.

All children will take time to adjust.

###

### **Helping your child through separation and divorce**

Explaining the situation

It can help if your child understands why you and your partner are separating. A good way to tackle this is to have a family meeting to talk about the separation with your child. If you can explain why it’s happening without one parent seeming like the ‘good guy’ or the ‘bad guy’, you can avoid your child feeling that he has to choose between you.

Your children need to know that it’s not their fault – it’s a grown-up decision about your relationship.

And even though your relationship with your partner is changing, your children have the right to an ongoing relationship with both of you, to love you both and to be loved by you both. They might not see themselves as children anymore, but they still look to you as a secure base.

Listening and letting your children talk

Once you’ve had a say, your children will need a chance to express their feelings. This could be during your family meeting or later on, when they have had a chance to think things over. Talking can help your children deal with difficult emotions and fears. Whenever your children are ready to talk, [actively listening](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/active_listening_teenagers.html) can help you work out how best to comfort them.

If your children find it difficult to talk to you about the separation, they might be able to talk to another trusted adult – perhaps an aunt or uncle, family friend, teacher or counsellor.

Reassuring your children

Some teenagers might worry that they need to look after you or their brothers or sisters. Let your children know that they do not need to look after everyone else. If any other family members need help, they’ll get it for themselves.

Your children don’t need to be involved in any issues between you and your former partner. It can help to tell your children clearly that they do not need to be a messenger between the two of you and they won’t have to answer questions from either of you about what the other is doing.

It can also help to reassure your children that you and your partner will do your best to keep them away from any conflict. If there has been any family violence, let your children know that they´ll be protected.

Sticking with routines

If it’s possible for your children to keep their daily routine, stay in the same house or neighbourhood, go to the same school and keep doing normal things like sport, it will make the change in your family easier for them.

Even if you and your children aren’t going to be living together full time any more, you can still [stay connected](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/staying_connected_teenagers.html). You can stay interested in your children’s life and keep doing the special things that you’ve always done – for example, kicking the footy, cooking together, watching your children play sport, seeing movies together or going shopping.

### **Signs your child is finding it hard to cope with separation or divorce**

During adolescence, your children are going through a lot of [social and emotional changes](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/social_and_emotional_development_teenagers.html), as well as [physical changes](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/physical_changes_teenagers.html). If you and your partner separate, the [ups and downs of being a teenager](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/moods.html) can get mixed up with your children’s feelings about your separation.

Your children might not be able to say they are struggling, but some signs that they are include:

* behaviour, mood or personality changes, including getting angry, upset or tearful a lot or more than usual
* not wanting to be around family members and not cooperating with family routines, shutting themselves in their bedroom for long periods, or spending more time online or on computer games
* [problems at school](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/school_problems_teenagers.html) or with schoolwork
* problems with [sleep](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/sleep_early_teens.html), or [eating problems](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/eating_disorders.html) like binge eating or loss of appetite
* losing interest in activities they usually enjoy or having problems with friends or peer groups
* [taking risks](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/risktaking_teenagers.html) like challenging school rules or not letting you know where they are, and even shoplifting, graffiti, taking drugs or binge drinking.

It can be hard to know whether difficult behaviour is just because your child is being a teenager, or whether it’s a sign your child is struggling with the separation. It could be a combination of both. Try not to jump to conclusions about what’s causing the behaviour, but be ready to listen and help.

It’s also a very good idea to let your child’s school know about the separation or divorce. Your child’s teachers might be able to watch out for changes in your child’s behaviour, or there could be things they can do to help.

Sometimes teenagers might need extra help dealing with their parents’ separation. If the conflict between parents has been particularly intense, or is still going on, or if one of the parents has been depressed or has mental illness, teenagers might find it helpful to see a counsellor.

**Source:** <http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/separation_helping_teens_adjust.html/context/2021>