

Parenting Positively

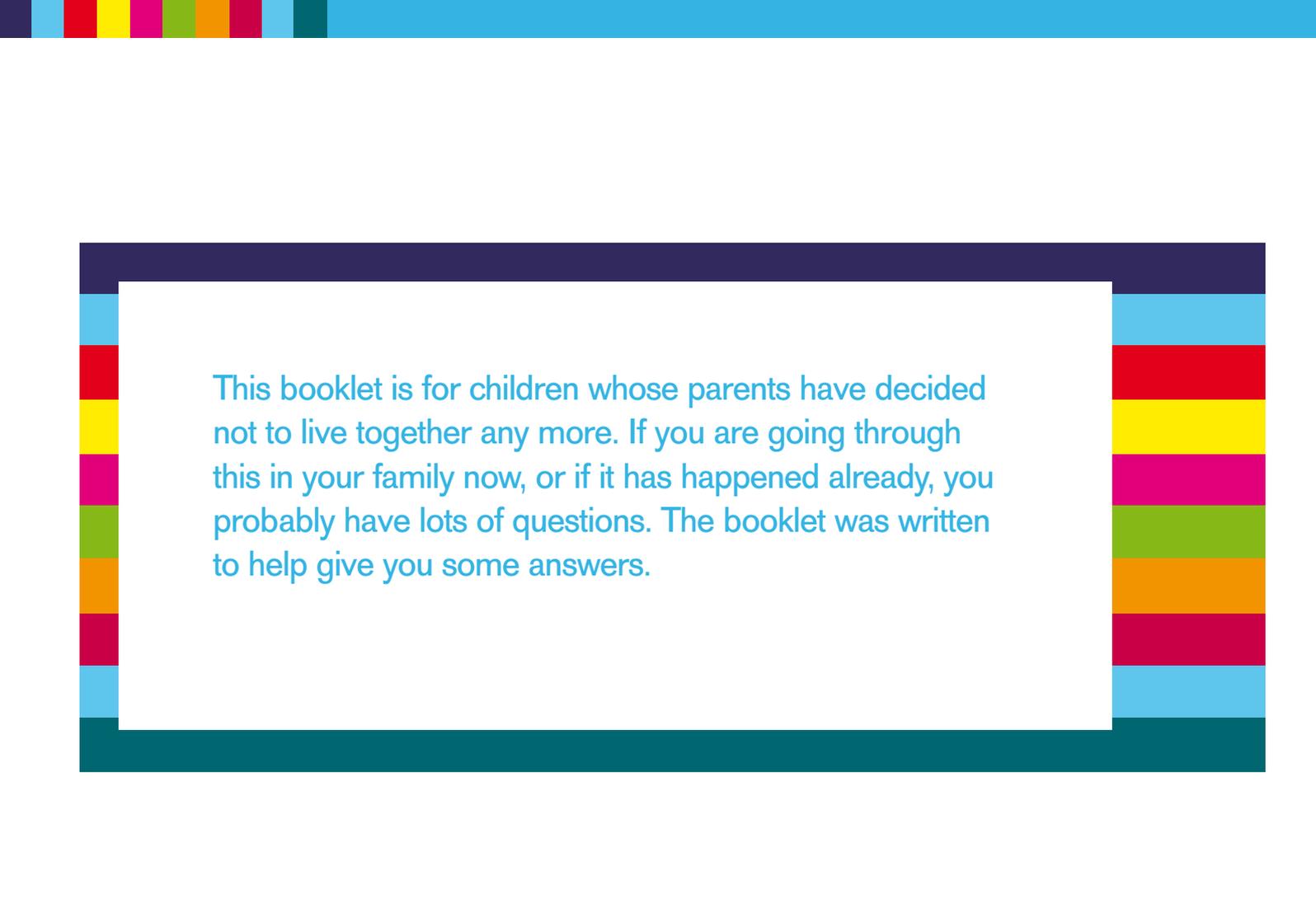
Coping with **SEPARATION**

For children aged 6 to 12



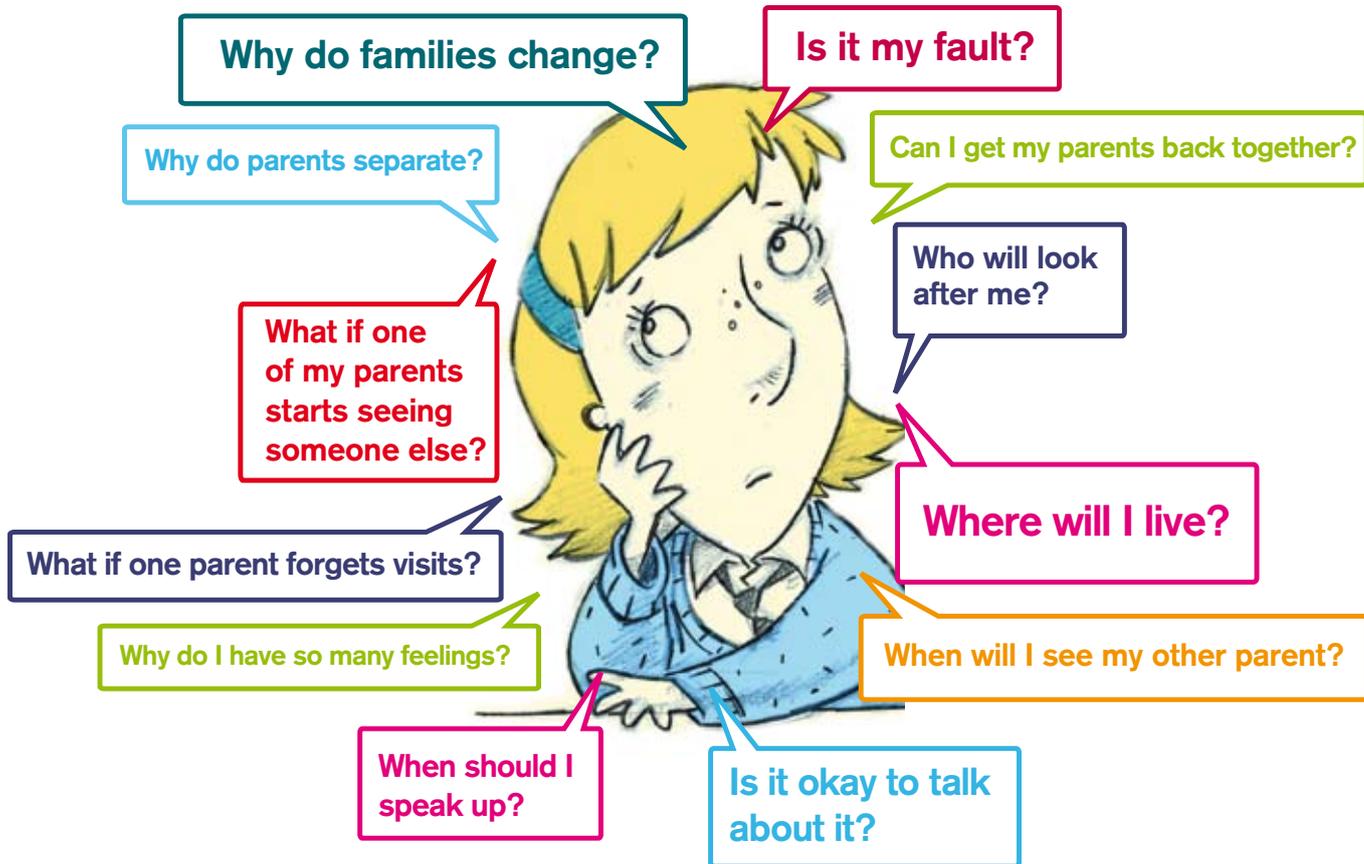
Family Support Agency





This booklet is for children whose parents have decided not to live together any more. If you are going through this in your family now, or if it has happened already, you probably have lots of questions. The booklet was written to help give you some answers.

My parents are separating – I have so many questions



Why do families change?

All through your life with your family, changes happen, some big and some small. Some changes are happy ones and others make you feel sad or mixed up. It's a big change when your parents decide to separate. Like all big changes, it will take time for you and your family to get used to it.

But remember, there's one thing that can't change. Your parents are your parents forever and they will always love you.

Why do parents separate?

It is not easy for parents to decide to separate. Parents don't stop loving their children, but sometimes they stop loving each other the way they once did. Often they spend a long time trying to solve their problems but just can't get along together, no matter how hard they try. This happens to other families too.



Is it my fault that my parents are separating?

No, you didn't cause your parents to separate so never blame yourself. Your parents aren't separating because of anything you did. It's between parents and isn't your fault.

Can I get my parents back together again?

Just like the separation isn't your fault, getting your parents back together is not up to you either. You may wish for this, but it is not likely that this will happen.

What will happen when my parents separate?

These are some of the questions you may want to talk to your parents about:

Will everything change?

Some things will change. The biggest change will be that your parents won't be living in the same house anymore. When this happens:

- Some children mainly live with and are cared for by one parent and spend time with their other parent.
- Other children spend part of the time living with one parent and part living with their other parent.

These are big changes. It might seem strange at first to be with one parent in their house or somewhere else, and then going back to your everyday house afterwards.

But depending on what your parents decide, you may still live in the same house, go to the same school and have the same friends.

Will I have to move house?

Some children have to move to another house to live with their mum or dad. When this happens, children may stay at the same school or they may have to change schools, it depends. This can be hard for children, but with the extra help of their parents they can get used to it after a while.

Who will look after me?

Parents usually make a plan about where you will live and how they will both work together to look after you, even though they won't be living in the same house.

When will I see my other parent if I don't live with them?

Your parents will decide as fairly as possible the times you spend with both of them, and what will happen at special times such as Christmas, Easter, birthdays and summer holidays. They will talk with you about these plans.



Will there be enough money if my parents have two houses to run?

When parents separate it might mean that there is less money than before for treats or special trips. For some children this can also mean that their mum or dad, who used to take care of them at home, has to get a job to earn some extra money. It's different for every family.

Will my parents still be the same?

Yes they will. How they feel about you won't change either. But sometimes children notice that their mum or dad are more tired, sad or get annoyed more easily than before. This won't last. It is just because they are trying to get used to all the changes too. Usually parents get help from other adults to talk through their feelings about the separation.

Remember – Your mum, dad, brothers, sisters, granny, grandad, aunts, uncles and cousins all still love you. That doesn't change!

Is it okay to talk about it?

Yes, of course. You will have lots of questions that need to be answered. Remember, you have a right to have the big changes that are happening in your family explained to you. You need to know so that you can understand and get used to the changes.

What if my mum or dad find it hard to talk to me about the separation?

Sometimes it can be hard for parents to talk about the separation. They may feel sad, worried or upset about it too. If you still need answers to your questions, or want to talk about your feelings, speak with someone that you trust, like your granny, grandad, aunt, uncle, big brother or sister, or a teacher.



What if one of my parents doesn't try to see me anymore or keeps forgetting visits?

If this is happening in your family, it is hard for you. It can happen for lots of different reasons. But remember that it's not your fault. Nothing you ever did or said made one parent decide not to see you any more or miss visits.

Sometimes parents become caught up with their own problems. They might forget how much children need both of their parents. This is a problem for your parents to try to sort out as best they can.

Why do I have so many feelings?

When parents split up, children have lots of feelings about it. Some will be the same and some will be different from other children. Sometimes you will have lots of different feelings at the same time.

Feelings go up and go down and sometimes get all mixed up. There are no right or wrong feelings. Your feelings can also change too as time goes by – just like your family is changing.

Other children, whose parents have split up too, have told us a lot about how children can feel before and afterwards. You might have some of these feelings too:

I feel mixed up!
I don't know what
I'm feeling.

I feel scared!
What's going
to happen?

I feel sad!
I miss Mum/
Dad.

I feel all alone!
No one feels like
I do.

I feel a bit happy!
It was hard to be happy
when they were
fighting a lot.

I feel safe!
I was afraid when there
was shouting and hitting
at home.

I feel worried!
I must spend the
same time with
Mum and Dad.

I feel angry!
It's Mum's fault.
It's Dad's fault

I'm afraid!
Will I see Mum/
Dad again

I feel strange!
I feel different from
everyone else.

I'm going to
pretend it is not
happening!

I feel guilty!
It's my fault.

I'm worried about
Mum/Dad.
Will they be ok?



Feelings can show themselves on the outside too.

If you feel scared or angry, your feelings might show themselves in how you act. You might cry, shout and stomp about, say mean things, do silly things or pick fights with your brothers and sisters and friends, without meaning to. Other times you might feel 'numb', like your feelings have switched off and you don't feel anything.

Your body can often show how you are feeling on the inside too. Big changes can make you tired, so you might often need to sleep more. You might have pains in your tummy or in your head. You may wake up at night thinking about what is happening or wake up in the mornings sometimes not wanting to go to school.



But you won't have feelings like these all the time. Some days you will be so busy doing things like playing with your friends, going to school and doing your homework that you will forget about these feelings for a while. That's okay too. It's good to give your mind a rest. The most important thing to know is that any feelings you have are okay.

Remember – The best way to deal with feelings is to talk about them with someone you trust. Talking gets your worries out, where you can get help to deal with them.

When should I speak up?

Sometimes parents forget that children are not adults and expect them to help them like an adult would. Other times they might do or say things about the other parent, which upsets children. If they weren't so upset, they would see that children can't sort out adult's problems. Also they might forget that their children still need to love both their parents, and never want to choose sides.

Things you might want to say to your parents

Please stop fighting. It makes my tummy ache.

I feel sad when you say mean things about Mum/Dad because I love both of you.

Please don't ask me to keep secrets. It's hard to feel stuck in the middle.

When you say mean things about Mum/Dad you make me feel I should take sides, and I don't want to.

Please talk to another adult about how you are feeling. I want to help you but I'm too young to know about grown-up stuff.

I need to be able to talk about Mum/Dad without you being sad or acting jealous.

Please don't ask me to bring messages to Mum/Dad. It's not my job.

If any of these describe what is happening in your family, speak up. Tell your parents, or someone else that you trust, how this is making you feel.



What if one of my parents starts seeing someone else?

During or after a separation, your mum or dad (or both of them) may start seeing other people. This might seem strange to you. You might feel sad, disappointed or angry, especially if you still wished that your parents would get back together. But remember, this doesn't mean that you are not special any more. Your parent still loves you. That won't change.

What can I do to make myself feel better?

Here are ideas from other children of things that helped make them feel better:

- **Doing everyday things like before** – Like going to school, playing with friends, looking after your pet, doing your homework or going to your childminder.
- **Being active** – Doing something active, especially outside in the fresh air, can help make you feel a lot better.



- **Sitting quietly to think** – You might like to just sit and think about what is happening in your family. Sometimes crying helps to let out feelings, or taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. Other things that might help too are drawing, painting, playing music or writing about how you feel.
- **Talking about your feelings with someone you trust** – Like your mum, dad, granny, grandad, big brother, big sister, aunts, uncles, childminder or a teacher. Sometimes you might find it helps to talk with some of your friends too.
- **Doing things that make you smile and laugh** – Like watching a favourite funny film or cartoon, reading a funny book, going to the cinema, dressing up or just playing games with friends.
- **Talking with other children whose parents have split up too** – It's good to know you are not the only one.



Remember – It can take a long time to get used to big changes, like when your parents separate. Give yourself time. Remember to keep talking about the changes and your feelings with someone you trust. Lots of children go through what you are going through. Life will be different than before but usually everything and everyone turns out fine.

This section explains words you may have heard

SEPARATION

This is when parents decide not to live together anymore. They might live by themselves or with someone else.

DIVORCE

If parents are married and decide to separate, they might decide later to get a divorce according to the law. This means that they won't be married to each other anymore and can marry other people some day if they want to. Not all parents who split up decide to get a divorce.

CUSTODY

This is a legal word to describe which parent you will mainly live with. Some parents have 'joint custody', which means that they share looking after their child. The child might spend part of the time living with one parent and part with the other. In other families, one parent gets custody and looks after the child most of the time. The other parent sees the child at other times.

CONTACT OR VISITING RIGHTS

These are legal words to describe the time you will be with the parent you don't mainly live with or when that parent will phone, email or write to you.



MAINTENANCE

This is the money that one parent gives to the parent you live with most. It helps to pay for things you need as you grow up, like clothes, school books, sport or music fees, food or other things you need.

MEDIATOR

A mediator's job is to help parents find a way to make important decisions about separating. The mediator will also help your parents to make a parenting plan about you which sets out what days and times you are with each of your parents.

LAW

This is the set of rules we must all keep to.

JUDGE

Judges work in courts and decide things according to the law.

SOLICITOR

Sometimes parents go to solicitors. A solicitor's job is to know the law and to help parents sort out their separation agreement. If parents can't agree, their solicitors can go to court for a judge to decide.

COUNSELLOR OR THERAPIST

A counsellor or therapist's job is to help children and adults to talk about their feelings and worries, and to give advice and information about how best to deal with them.



Compiled by Fiona Lane

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This series was produced by the Family Support Agency and Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

The Family Support Agency provides support to families through locally based Family Resource Centres, through supporting organisations providing Marriage, Relationship, Child and Bereavement Counselling Services and by directly providing Family Mediation through its 16 family mediation centres to couples going through a separation or divorce. It carries out research, provides information and advises the Minister on family related matters. The Family Support Agency was established as a statutory agency in 2003.

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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