

Parenting Positively

Helping teenagers to cope with

Separation

TÚSLA

An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency


Barnardos



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Tusla - Child and Family Agency is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. Tusla has responsibility for the following range of services: child welfare and protection services, including family support services; family resource centres and associated national programmes; early years (pre-school) inspection services; educational welfare responsibilities; domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services; and services related to the psychological welfare of children.

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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There is information for teenagers on separation on www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp

Introduction

The most important issue to deal with when separating is your relationship with your children. Although your relationship with your partner is changing, your role as a parent is for life. Your children, whatever their age, need you both to put them first.

This booklet is for parents of teenagers who are separating or divorcing. When parents separate, it is a painful and stressful experience for a family. Every family member needs help and support to cope with the emotional consequences and changes it brings.

Why support teenagers?

Your teenage child is already negotiating a range of physical and psychological changes during this stage in their development. They need your understanding and support to cope with the additional changes and stresses caused by separation.

Teenagers also need support after separation. This is because separation isn't just a once-off event. It involves a whole process of change and adjustment, taking place over months or years. This means your teenager's needs change over time. Parents who separated when their children were little often find that new feelings and questions about their separation are awakened for their teenager during their adolescent years.

Teenagers might also need support to cope with new family changes that can happen over time, such as a parent's new partner or stepfamilies.

The information in this booklet will help you to support your teenage child. It outlines:

- How separation can affect teenagers and parents.
- Tips on talking with your child about the separation.
- Ways of separating that puts your teenager's interests first.
- The importance of open communication.
- How to support your teenager's adjustment and well-being before, during and after your separation.
- Where to get help and support.

WHEN YOU PUT YOUR TEENAGER'S INTERESTS FIRST DURING YOUR SEPARATION, YOU WILL MAKE BETTER DECISIONS FOR THEM.

You accept your teenage child's right to have a relationship with both parents.

You both keep to your care and custody arrangements, but are flexible and co-operative if they need to be changed for your child's sake.

Key messages

The best decisions are where...

You encourage your teenager to express their feelings and be involved in decisions, as this will help them to adapt to the changes in their life.

You both co-operate with each other and reach agreement without fighting or using your teenage child to communicate with, or hurt, one another.

You ensure that changes in other parts of their life are kept to a minimum.


What does it mean to be a teenager?

The teenage years are a time of intense changes. Hormonal changes leading to dramatic physical growth are one of the most obvious. But there are also huge changes in a teenager's emotional and social development and therefore their reasoning and understanding of things. Negotiating these changes is a normal part of a teenager's journey towards independent adulthood and can be challenging.

Strong family relationships and the support and understanding of parents provide a secure foundation from which teenagers can make these changes.

While each teenager will experience development at their own pace and in their own unique way, common behaviours can include:

- Seeking greater independence from parents and control over their own decisions.
- Relationships with friends becoming more important and more intense.
- Moodiness and mood swings.
- Appearing self-absorbed, self-conscious and more aware of differences between themselves and others.
- Valuing privacy and personal space. Personal feelings may be hidden from parents.
- Experimentation (e.g. with different identities and friends) and risk-taking.
- Forming emotional attachments, and often romantic and intimate relationships.
- Increasingly forming their own opinions and challenging the views of others, such as their parents and other authority figures.
- Tending to return to childish behaviour, particularly when stressed.



For parents, this stage in their child's development is also a period of intense change and adjustment. Your parental control is gradually, or suddenly, reducing. You might be feeling 'shut out' of many aspects of your teenager's life. Your teenage child might be making more of their own decisions. You might feel worried, confused and challenged by their behaviour.

Remember, teenagers are not able to see the situation in an adult way. Their perspective is mostly centred on their own needs. While you may find this upsetting at times, it is normal for their stage of development and you need to understand and respect it.

Why focus on children's rights and needs during separation?

THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Ireland signed up to in 1992) provides many rights to all children and young people in order to protect them, promote their well-being and help them to develop their unique potential.

These include the right:

- To be safe.
- To be protected and live free from violence, abuse or harm (this includes witnessing violence and abuse).
- To be brought up by their parents in a family, unless it is not in their interests.
- To express their views and to have them taken into account in matters that affect them.
- To have decisions that will affect them made in their best interests.
- To be treated with dignity, respect and fairness.
- To be free from discrimination, bullying and harassment of any kind.

Research tells us that putting your children's needs first during your separation or divorce **does** make a difference. Those who were found to have adapted well:

- Received clear explanations from their parents about what was happening and why.
- Had parents who behaved in responsible and predictable ways.
- Were supported in having good relationships with **both** parents during and after the separation.
- Had someone with whom they could talk to and confide their feelings

'It depends what the situation is... Like in our case it was good 'cause, like, we all came closer together, there was no arguing any more, but, like... it depends on the parents.'
(Girl, aged 14)





Frequently Asked Questions

Is separation the same for all families?

No. This is because family circumstances and reasons for separating are unique to each family. Your own culture, traditions and ethnic background will influence how you, your family and your community deal with your separation. Separation happens in families where parents are married or co-habiting.

But whatever your circumstances, all separating families usually experience the following.

FAMILY CHANGES

A separation might mean dramatic family changes, such as the departure of one parent from the home, changes in routines and how special occasions are celebrated. A change of family home for a teenage child may also mean adjusting to a new school and loss of friends.

LOSS AND GRIEF

Separation is often compared to grief, as it is a time of loss for everyone. It is normal that family members grieve the loss of:

- The family as they knew it.
- The future they had hoped for.
- The daily presence and availability of a parent.

'It was kind of like someone had died or something like that. It was kind of like... he's not there anymore. A pain in the head.' (Boy, aged 15)

Remember, things usually get better as time goes by. Give yourself and your teenage child time to adjust.

Some parents might worry about being isolated, or that their options are limited, if their relationship ends. If this applies to you, remember that you are not alone. Check out the back of this booklet for details of organisations that provide help and support to separating families.

What are the best living arrangements for teenagers?

These will be different for every family. When planning:

- Put your teenager's interests first.
- Talk to each child separately about his or her individual needs.
- Ask them for their views.
- Work out what's practical and realistic for your family.

WHAT ABOUT BIRTHDAYS, HOLIDAYS, FAMILY GET-TOGETHERS AND OTHER SPECIAL OCCASIONS?

- Remember how important these occasions are to teenagers.
- Ask them what they want to do.
- Plan to make them successful for your teenager.
- Sort out the details well in advance and let everyone know what's happening.
- Accept that these occasions can be hard for everyone, especially in the first year after the separation.

Impact of Separation on Teenagers

How does separation affect teenagers?

All young people are different and will cope with stress in different ways. Your teenager's reactions to separation usually depend on factors such as:

- Their age, gender and personality.
- The circumstances of your separation.
- Having someone they trust to support them.

While all teenagers will need support, some are more resilient than others and may cope well with the family changes. Others may experience greater difficulty, requiring additional help.

'Lately it has really hit me that my dad doesn't come home... round about 7 o'clock.' (Girl, aged 14)

FEELINGS

It's normal for teenagers to experience a range of strong emotions about the separation. These might include shock, sadness, worry, anger, embarrassment, guilt, relief, fear and rejection. Such responses are likely to be expressed in their behaviour and are usually resolved over time.

Common behaviours include:

- Mood swings
- Being sad and withdrawn, perhaps crying or staying in their bedroom for periods
- Being irritable or angry
- Not sleeping
- Tired, distracted, distant, sighing
- Difficulties concentrating on homework or at school
- Returning to more child-like behaviour, in an attempt to feel more secure

'I'd no idea, so when it did happen, I was in terrible shock for a long while' (Girl, aged 15)

OTHER POSSIBLE BEHAVIOURS AND WAYS YOU CAN HELP:

- **Taking-on more adult-like behaviour.** A teenager might try to take on a parental role, often causing conflict with brothers and sisters who resent being 'bossed around'. If this happens, acknowledge their efforts and create more appropriate ways for them to help.
- **Acting strong and 'in control'.** A teenager might refuse to talk about feelings or deny needing support. Let them know you understand how difficult it is for them and that it helps to talk with someone they trust.
- **Becoming aggressive and hostile towards one or both parents.** Talk with your teenager after an angry outburst. Help them to understand their responses to their anger. They might be feeling confused, embarrassed or ashamed. Discuss safe ways of expressing anger, such as finding someone to talk to or finding release through physical exertion such as exercise, sport, using a punch-bag etc.

- **Criticising a parent.** This may involve 'taking sides' or blaming one or both parents. Behaviours might include refusing to see a parent or becoming controlling by demanding to stay in one place or switching homes constantly. Let them know you understand the feelings behind the criticism and that you are there for them. Try to work with your former partner to support your child. Where possible, keep to the arrangements agreed.
- **Distancing themselves from the family,** such as retreating to their room or staying outside of the house for long periods. Actively try to involve your teenager in family activities. Keep involved and available to them.
- **Engaging in self-risking behaviour,** such as alcohol or drug misuse, as a means of challenging parental authority and/or shutting out painful feelings.

Seek professional help if you are concerned about your child's safety and welfare.



Expect that your teenage child's adjustment could take a while. Be patient. Some emotional or behavioural reactions to the stress of separation last for months or even longer and often happen in phases. Some may be much more temporary, if handled with sensitivity. It is also important to remember that your son or daughter's reactions do not necessarily indicate permanent problems.

Remember, teenagers are not able to see the situation in an adult way. Their perspective is mostly centred on their own needs. While you may find this upsetting at times, it is normal for their stage of development and it's important to understand and respect it.

What if my teenager won't talk to me?

It's not unusual for teenagers to struggle with their feelings about the separation. This might be because they crave privacy, feel embarrassed or are overwhelmed by the powerful feelings they are experiencing.

Teenagers need to know that:

- Their feelings are normal.
- They are not the problem. The separation has created the stresses and changes in their life.
- It takes time to work through these feelings and adjust to their changed family situation.
- It helps to talk with someone they trust, such as a friend or relative.
- You are there for them.

There is information for teenagers on separation on www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp

What if I'm worried about how my teenager is coping?

There are many feelings about separation that are common in teenagers, such as sadness, anger and confusion. The intensity of these feelings usually lessen over time. But sometimes emotions such as sadness or anger don't go away, continue to hurt deeply and make it hard for your teenager to enjoy the good things about their life.

Behaviours that might signal a teenager is experiencing difficulty include:

- Feeling sad or crying often.
- Hurting themselves.
- Not wanting to be with friends or family.
- Losing interest in doing things.
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Low self-esteem.
- Feeling left out of their social scene.
- Being irritable, angry or aggressive
- Eating too much or not enough
- Causing trouble at school
- Running away from home
- Frequently complaining of illness, such as headaches or stomach aches
- Putting themselves at risk through alcohol or drug misuse

If you are worried about how your teenager is reacting or you are struggling to deal with their emotions or behaviour, you both might need help and support.

Sources of help include:

- Your family doctor
- A psychologist, counsellor or therapist
- Youth worker
- Organisations such as Headstrong

Or check out the Finding Help section at the back of this booklet.

Will our separation have a damaging and permanent effect on our teenage child?

With support, teenagers can adjust successfully to separation. There is no 'best age' for separation to happen. Children and teenagers have different challenges and issues to overcome at each developmental stage.

While there may be gender differences in how teenagers react to separation, boys are not more adversely affected than girls. They may show distress in different ways.

'It's ... good... for... people that it should happen to because... it's not good at the time but you'll actually realise it after a while that it is good, but it is hard and it's not a nice thing to go through... but, like, I would never wish it on anybody.' (Girl, aged 14)



What can be harmful for teenagers?

Research tells us that the factors that put teenagers most at risk of harm are:

CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS BEFORE, DURING AND/OR AFTER SEPARATION

Arguments and tension between parents affect teenagers deeply, leaving them anxious, aggressive or withdrawn, and more likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems.

REPEATED DISRUPTIONS TO THEIR LIVES

This means having to move homes, change schools and lose contact with family members or friends. This might result from several family changes, such as the breakdown of two or more parental relationships and/or adjusting to more than one new step-parent.

FEELING THEIR LIFE IS OUT OF CONTROL

This happens when teenagers don't receive adequate explanations or reassurances from parents about the separation or are not involved in decisions that affect them. This can leave them anxious, fearful and confused.

FEELING ALONE OR 'DIFFERENT'

This can result from teenagers being isolated and without support inside or outside the family.

Remember, the way in which you separate and how you relate together as parents afterwards will impact either positively or negatively on how your teenage child will adjust.

Will the separation affect my teenager at school?

It can be very difficult for teenagers to apply themselves to classes, study or homework when there is upheaval in their life, particularly in the early stages. They might also have extra responsibilities at home before or after school.

- Although your teenager might want to keep your family situation private, it is better to let their school know. Most teachers and guidance counsellors usually understand how difficult family separation is for students.
- Talk it over with your child. Ask them if they would like to be involved. Decide who is the best person at school to talk to.

‘Cause I was always upset and sad. I used to be crying... If, like, a teacher said “boo” to me or anything, I’d start to cry.’ (Girl, aged 16)



Communicating with your Teenage Child

Why is it important to talk to our teenager?

When parents separate, teenagers often:

- Feel confused and insecure.
- Blame themselves.
- Cover up emotions and try to cope alone.
- Feel isolated and 'different'.

You might think your teenage child is okay, but it's important to remember:

- This is a time of major change for them as well as for you.
- Teenagers usually don't have the skills to understand when they need help.
- Each of your children has different needs.

Keep communication as open as you can. Talking with your teenager is important. It helps them to:

- Feel less alone.
- Express their feelings and worries.
- Make sense of what's happening and how they are feeling.
- Feel more in control by contributing to family decisions and plans.

'I felt angry because I wasn't told what was, what was happening. Like... I thought I had the right to... know... even a bit about it... because I would, would have more time to deal with it.' (Boy, aged 15)

How and what do we say about the separation?

The worry and guilt that teenagers often feel about the separation can be removed with early, honest and reassuring communication by parents.

WHEN AND HOW?

- Tell your teenager about the separation as soon as it becomes a firm decision, and when a date for the separation has been agreed.
- Plan together in advance how you will talk to them. The place should be familiar to your teenage child and free of distractions.
- Tell them with both parents present, if possible. Try to spend time with your son or daughter individually over the following days, so they can discuss and share feelings with both parents.
- Feelings of anger, blame or guilt should be left out of the conversation. Agree that you will not argue or contradict each other in front of your child.

WHAT SHOULD WE SAY?

- The discussion about your separation should be tailored to your teenager's level of maturity. However, a basic message can be given such as: *'Mum and Dad used to love each other, but now we're not happy together and have decided we'd be happier apart. What has happened occurred between us, but we will always be your parents and we will always be there to love and take care of you.'*
- Let your son or daughter know that they are not the cause of the separation. It is **not** their fault.
- Let them know that separation is very common.
- Tell them clearly that the separation is permanent, in order to avoid giving false hope of a future reconciliation.
- Say repeatedly that the separation will not change the fact that parents are forever. Their family is changing, not ending.

- Try to answer their questions as truthfully as possible. Give just enough information so that they are prepared for the upcoming changes but not so much that they become anxious or upset by adult issues and problems.

HOW MIGHT THEY REACT?

- Teenage children will not all react the same way. Your child might express disbelief, upset or become angry. Others might pretend they don't care and appear to 'shrug it off'. For teenagers who are openly upset or angry it is important to acknowledge their feelings and that it is okay to express them. Those who don't appear to respond may be in shock. Give them time to process the information and express their feelings.
- If there has been a history of domestic abuse or addiction, a teenage child may perceive positive benefits to the ending of the relationship, but may have mixed feelings about it, such as guilt or loss. These issues need to be discussed sensitively and in a caring way. Keep in mind that it hurts children to hear negative things about either parent. (See the booklet relating to Domestic Abuse in this series.)

ARE THEIR OTHER IMPORTANT MESSAGES TO CONVEY?

- Reassure your son or daughter about the future. Be as specific as possible about future plans and living arrangements.
- Tell them that he or she can talk to you at any time.

'I would have liked to know why they were going to split up... I think I would have liked for them to sit down and say what happened and what will happen in the future... but it kind of just never happened!' (Girl, aged 16)

How can we talk to our teenager and keep in touch with their feelings?

- Show interest in their life, friends and interests. Talking frequently is helpful.
- Create times for your teenager to be alone with you without distractions.
- Invite conversation. Ask them if they have any questions about what's happening. Answer their questions briefly and honestly, but don't pass on details of any disagreement or conflict between you and your former partner.
- Let them know you want to hear how they feel, but don't pressure them.
- Listen to what they say. Show them you are listening. Don't feel you have to fix their feelings. It's painful but you can't.
- If they say they are worried, try to find out what is on their minds and reassure them.
- Let them know they can talk to you at any time.
- Plan something positive together.
- As time goes by, help your teenager to notice when things are getting easier.

If your teenager is finding it difficult to talk:

- Suggest that they write what they want to say in a letter or email and you both can talk about it when they feel comfortable.
- Help them to identify another trusted adult they can talk to, perhaps in the wider family.

'Well, like, she was there if I got upset or anything, like, she was there so I could talk to her, I could ask her a question.'
(Girl, aged 14)

'I'm closer to him because I live with him and he knows everything that goes on for me.' (Girl, aged 14)

How can we make sure our teenager has a say?

Ask your teenager their views about decisions that affect them.

If your teenager wants to be involved:

- Help them to understand the options.
- Explain you can't promise to follow their suggestions, but that you will put their interests first when making decisions.
- Take their wishes seriously and try to fit them into the arrangements.
- If this cannot be done, explain the reasons why.
- Don't ask them to make decisions that involve choosing between parents.
- If your teenager wants to leave the arrangements to you, tell them that is okay. Give them the option of having their say through another family member or a counsellor.

'I wouldn't take the decisions 'cause it would look like I'm taking sides but I'm not taking sides... I never want to take sides.' (Girl, aged 14)

What's Really Best for Them?

Is there a positive way to separate?

Yes, it will help your teenage child if you:

1. TAKE A SHARED PARENTING APPROACH

This means continuing your joint role as parents, sharing the responsibility as equally as possible from the time of separation.


As soon as you stop living together you need a plan so that your children keep seeing both of you.

- Make this your first priority.
- Keep it separate from the other things you need to sort out later, like custody, money and property.
- Agree on an initial plan and talk to your teenager about it.
- A more long-term plan can be worked out later.

2. DEVELOP A 'PARENTING PLAN'

This is a written document that sets out how you will jointly care for your teenager. It includes how you will make decisions about them, share responsibilities and time with them, and how you will deal with the difficulties that arise. You can develop a parenting plan by sitting down together and working it out or with the help of trained **family mediators**, or solicitors who have trained in a '**collaborative law**' approach (See Finding Help, page 35).

Remember to talk to your teenagers about their views and opinions when developing the plan and share the details of it with them afterwards.



We all, like, discussed it and talked about it, anytime any changes were going to happen.' (Boy, aged 15)

3. PUT THEIR INTERESTS FIRST

When faced with decisions it can help to put yourself in your teenager's shoes and ask yourself 'what's really best for them?' This approach might help you both to be co-operative, flexible and more open to compromising when it's in your teenager's interests.

For example, when planning a visiting schedule, it is the **quality** of contact, rather than the quantity, that matters most. Also, children and teenagers have different needs at different stages in their lives, which may mean that day-to-day care and visiting arrangements may need to be reviewed over time for their benefit.

In situations of abuse or violence, your teenage child should not be placed in a situation where they are likely to be at risk. Any contact arrangements with your former partner must ensure that they will be safe and protected. This may mean that in certain situations contact is independently supervised. (See Keeping Safe on page 39 or the Barnardos' booklet Helping Teenagers to Cope with Domestic Abuse in this series.)

4. DON'T INVOLVE YOUR TEENAGER IN ADULT CONFLICTS

Before separation, arguing and hostility between parents is very difficult and upsetting for children. After separation, conflict is just as damaging and will make it harder for your teenager to have a close relationship with their non-resident parent.

Remember, your future relationship with your children can be damaged if you speak negatively about their other parent.

5. SUPPORT THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH BOTH PARENTS

This means respecting your teenager's relationship with your former partner. In situations where their other parent has a partner, this may mean learning to respect your teenager's decision to develop a relationship with this person.

'I think that was one of the things they said, like, "We'll always be here," you know, "he's still your dad, I'm still your mum."' (Girl, aged 16)

What can we do to support our teenager's well-being?

1. BE REASSURING AND OPTIMISTIC

Continually reinforce the messages to your teenage child that:

- You love them and that you will be there for them throughout this difficult process of family change.
- The separation is not their fault.
- Separation is very common.
- Things will get better over time.

2. KEEP CHANGES TO A MINIMUM

Maintain as much continuity and routine as possible in your teenager's life. Ensure stability by ensuring they keep up friendships, attend school and carry on with their usual hobbies, interests and activities. Sticking to the arrangements you have made is also important.

Do everything you can to increase your teenager's self-esteem through praise, encouragement and achievement. A secure teenager with a positive self-image will cope better.

3. TALK AND ACTIVELY LISTEN

Keep your teenage child informed about what is happening and why. Ask for their views about decisions that affect them.

4. SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE WIDER FAMILY

Actively encourage your teenager's connections with family members, on both sides of the family, whose relationship with your child is positive and beneficial.

5. TRY NOT TO OVER-COMPENSATE

Resist the temptation to make up for your teenage child's loss with material things, food treats or lack of discipline in the home. Emotional hurt is best healed with care, support and consistency in parenting, not things.

6. AVAIL OF A PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Encourage your teenage child's participation in a local peer support programme (such as TeenBetween or Rainbow's 'Spectrum' programme). Teenagers benefit from the opportunity to meet others who have had similar experiences, reducing feelings of isolation or of 'being different'.

'I wasn't ashamed to say anything to them because they were all the same as me.' (Boy, aged 11)

'It [teen counselling] has kind of taught me how to speak and talk about how I felt... so it's easier now to say how I feel.' (Girl, aged 16)

7. GET ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Let all significant adults in your teenager's life know about the family changes so that they can be a source of support for your child, for example a teacher, school guidance counsellor, sports coach, family members or trusted friends.

If you are concerned about your son or daughter's well-being or safety, seek professional help and support.

There is information for teenagers about separation and general well-being on www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp





Communicating with Each Other

How can we communicate positively as parents during and after our separation?

Learning to communicate respectfully as parents is one of the most important ways you can help your teenage child to adjust healthily to your separation. This can be achieved by creating a business-like parenting relationship with your former partner.

DO:

- Develop a joint 'parenting plan' and commit to making it work. If you can't agree, get someone to help you both who won't take sides, like a **mediator** or **counsellor**.
- Co-operate and be fair around issues relating to the children.
- Be positive and encouraging about your teenage child's relationship with their other parent.
- Respect your former partner's individual parenting style. Remember, both mothers and fathers bring different skills and styles to parenting, both of which are important for children and teenagers.
- Be clear in your communication. Talk to them directly. Never ask your teenage child to carry messages, no matter how minor.
- Plan regular discussions to talk about your child. Try not to wait until there's a problem. Except for emergencies, call only during agreed upon times. Be polite. Never use bad language, name-calling or discuss issues under the influence of alcohol or drugs. If you feel yourself getting un-businesslike, agree to talk at another time.

DON'T:

- Discuss matters unrelated to your teenage child unless your former partner agrees to do so. Respect their privacy. Don't seek the details of his or her life or use your children as 'spies' to get this information for you.
- Break appointments or be late. Stick to the arrangements for the sake of your children. Only make changes without your former partner's agreement in an emergency. If you do change arrangements to suit yourself, tell your children yourself. Don't leave it to the other parent.
- Play 'separation games'. Because you may have been hurt in the separation, there can be an urge to 'strike back' or punish your former partner. When a teenage child is used as an instrument to hurt the other parent, the effects can be devastating, especially on your teenager. There are no winners. Awareness of this damaging behaviour can lead to self-discipline for both parents – and can protect your teenager's emotional well-being.

COMMUNICATION TIPS

- Agree together a time and place to talk.
- Plan in advance what you are going to say.
- Try to face each other and sit or stand at the same level so you aren't looking up or down at each other.
- Be honest and clear about what is on your mind.
- Try to make sure your body language reflects what you are saying. Your posture, tone of voice, facial expressions and eye contact all say something about how you are feeling.
- Listen to your former partner without interrupting.
- Be clear at the end about what you have agreed together.



New Partners or Stepfamilies

How will our teenage child respond if one, or both, of us have a new partner?

A new partner may signify the end of your son or daughter's hopes of a reunification between their parents and confirm that their family has changed for good.

Research tells us that it benefits children and teenagers if:

- You wait until a new relationship is established before introducing your new partner to your teenage child.
- You delay living with anyone else until your teenager has had some time to adjust to the separation.
- New partners and their families are introduced sensitively and gradually.

Often, teenagers feel they cannot accept your new partner without feeling disloyal to their other parent. It will help if you can discuss this issue in advance with your former partner, so that they can provide support to your teenager in making the necessary adjustments.

Remember, your teenage child will need time and support to work through this additional family change. It will be important to set aside separate times to spend alone with them. Listen to what your teenager has to say without feeling you have to change their minds or agree with them.

STEPFAMILIES

Research tells us that support for children and teenagers may be just as vital at the time of forming new stepfamilies as it is following separation. Your son or daughter will need help to blend into a new family structure. Be realistic about what you expect from your teenager. Be patient. It will take time and support for them to fully accept the role a stepparent will play in their life.

When Teenagers are Let Down by a Parent

How can I support my teenage child when my former partner repeatedly misses visits or no longer stays in contact?

If this is happening in your family, it is a difficult and painful situation for your son or daughter. They may experience feelings such as loss, guilt and self-blame, sadness and anger. In order to help your teenage child to cope it is important to:

- Continually reassure them that it is not their fault and that nothing they ever said or did caused this situation to happen.
- Reassure your teenage child that they still have a family. One parent may be gone, or may miss visits, but you are there for them every day. Other family members and trusted friends in your son or daughter's life can also provide much-needed comfort and understanding.

- In situations when there is no contact with the non-resident parent, ensure that your teenage child has as much information as possible about their parent (e.g. photographs and keepsakes). Suggest that they write down happy memories of their parent in a diary or journal.
- Encourage contact with your former partner's wider family, if this is possible and in your teenage child's best interests.

'I just say he's dead... because I don't see him. I'm never going to anyway. But me auntie, she keeps telling him, "You should go and see your sons", but he says he doesn't want to... he says he's moving on!' (Boy, aged 16)



Support from the Wider Family

Is keeping up contact with my former partner's family worth the effort?

Yes. Research tells us that relatives, particularly grandparents, can be important sources of comfort and support to teenagers during and after separation. This means that it will benefit teenagers if they keep up connections with relatives from **both** sides of the family.


Relatives can:

- Be a 'listening ear' for your teenager.
- Let your teenager know how special they are to the whole family.
- Help your teenager have some quiet, relaxing time away from the worries of the separation.

Act as an important link in situations where a parent is absent or doesn't stay in contact

'Me nana... she's always been there from... when the fighting all started!' (Girl, aged 14)

Remember, in a situation of domestic abuse or violence your teenager should **not** be put in a position where they may be at risk of harm. See the Keeping Safe section at the back of this booklet.



It's hurtful to my teenager when my former partner's relatives take sides or criticise me. What can I do?

Talk to your teenager about it. Let them know that everyone in a family deals with separation differently. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins will all have feelings and opinions about it. But these are **their** opinions, and it's okay not to share them.

Try talking to your former partner, or the relative in question, about how this behaviour is making your teenager feel. It's possible that they might not have realised how their behaviour was affecting your child.

Understanding your Own Feelings and Needs

Our separation feels like an emotional rollercoaster. Is this normal?

It's completely normal to have very strong feelings about your separation. These might include:

Shock, sadness, regret, loneliness, foolishness, blame, guilt, anger, worry about the future (e.g. about money, your children), grief, shame, jealousy, resentment, disappointment, relief, hopelessness or exhaustion.

It's important not to let your feelings take over. If you do, you are more likely to:

- Be unreasonable and not think clearly about what's best for your child.
- Try to get your teenager to take sides.
- Try to punish your former partner.
- Try to block your former partner from your teenager's life.


Take care of yourself during this time and get help with your own painful feelings. If you are able to make a healthy adjustment, your teenage child will be more likely to do so too.

Remember, never make your son or daughter your confidante as this places an unfair burden on them. If you recognise that this is happening, look for a more appropriate source of emotional support for yourself, such as a trusted adult or friend.

How can I support my teenage child when I often feel sad and overwhelmed by the changes and demands?

TIPS FOR COPING

- Take good care of your health (get enough sleep, eat well and take regular exercise – all great stress busters!)
- Tell people what's happening, especially family and friends, and what they can do to help.

- 
- Take a mental break for a while. Spend time doing something you enjoy, treat yourself or have some fun.
 - Don't cut yourself off from family and friends.
 - Keep in touch with your feelings. Keep a diary. Talk to a trusted friend.
 - Make a list of things that are better since you separated. Think positive thoughts.
 - Make plans for the future.
 - Let your children see you laugh.
 - Focus on what you know will make your children happy.
 - Never hesitate to ask for help. Let others support you along the way. It does make a difference.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR SEPARATING PARENTS INCLUDE:

Trusted friends or family members.

- **Support groups** – It can help to talk to other parents who have separated.
- **Services for separating families or a counsellor or therapist** – Seeking professional support for yourself or your teenage child is not a sign of weakness, but an acknowledgement that separation is a major life crisis for a family.

Finding Help

Don't hesitate to look for help for you or your teenage child before, during or after your separation.

Barnardos

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.

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

Tel: 01 453 0355

Email: info@barnardos.ie

www.barnardos.ie

Tusla - Child and Family Agency

Tusla - Child and Family Agency is the State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. It is responsible for child protection, early intervention and family support services in Ireland.

Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8.

Tel: 01 771 8500

Email: info@tusla.ie

www.tusla.ie

Family Mediation Service

Family mediation is a service to help married and non-married couples who have decided to separate or divorce, or who have already separated.

For contact details of local centres see

http://www.legalaidboard.ie/lab/publishing.nsf/content/Family_Mediation_Service_

Family Resource Centre

National Forum

A support network working with the Family Resource Centres (FRCs) located in communities throughout Ireland.

www.familyresource.ie

Support for parents

SERVICES FOR SEPARATING COUPLES

Accord (Catholic Marriage Care Service)

Tel: 01 505 3112
www.accord.ie

AIM Family Services Family law information & family mediation service
Tel: 01 670 8363
www.aimfamilyservices.ie

Association of Collaborative Law Practitioners

Tel: 01 230 2157
Email: info@acp.ie
www.acp.ie

Clanwilliam Marriage & Family Institute

Tel: 01 676 1363
www.clanwilliam.ie

Free Legal Advice Centres

Tel: 01 874 5690
Lo-call: 1890 350 250
www.flac.ie

GENERAL SUPPORT

Al-Anon Support to families of problem drinkers
Email: info@al-anon-ireland.org
www.al-anon-ireland.org

Aware Support

Tel: 01 661 7211
Email: info@aware.ie
www.aware.ie

Citizens Information Service for information about all public services in Ireland
Tel: 0761 079 000
www.citizensinformation.ie

Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Tel: 01 230 3526
Email: iacp@iacp.ie
www.iacp.ie

ISPCC

The ISPCC provides the Childline service, where children and young people can call with any worries and concerns. ISPCC also provides a range of services to support parents.
Tel: 01 676 7960
www.ispcc.ie

Relationships Ireland

Tel: 01 678 5256
www.relationshipsireland.com

Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)

Community based debt counselling service
Tel: 0761 072 000
Email: helpline@mabs.ie
www.mabs.ie

One Family Services and support to one-parent families
Lo-call: 1890 662 212
www.onefamily.ie

Parentline Confidential helpline for parents under stress or seeking parenting advice and support
Lo-call: 1890 927 277
Email: info@parentline.ie
www.parentline.ie

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
Tel: 01 878 0255
Email: info@paveepoint.ie
www.paveepoint.ie

Samaritans The Samaritans is a 24-hour, confidential support service for anyone who is worried or distressed and wants someone to talk to.
Callsave: 116 123
www.samaritans.org

Treoir Services and information for unmarried parents and their children.
Lo-call: 1890 252 084
Email: info@treoir.ie
www.treoir.ie

Professional counselling or therapy
Your family GP will be an important source of help and advice if you are concerned about your teenage child's adjustment to separation. Your GP can make referrals to your local HSE Child and Adolescent Psychological Service, Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Service or Child Guidance Centre, as required. Your GP may also assist you in identifying a private counsellor or therapist.

Support for teenagers

Barnardos has support and information for teenagers on separation on www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp.

Rainbows – ‘Spectrum Programme’

This is a service that runs support programmes for children and young people who have experienced separation or divorce.

The ‘Spectrum Programme’ is specifically for 12–18 year olds.

Tel: 01 473 4175

Email: ask@rainbowsireland.com

www.rainbowsireland.com

Teen Between

This is a free specialised counselling service to help 12–18 year olds deal with their parent’s separation or divorce.

Tel: 1800 303 191

Email: teenbetween@mracs.ie

www.teenbetween.ie

In partnership with the Marriage and Relationship Counselling Service (MRCS), the Teen Between service is also provided at 21 locations throughout the country by Youth Work Ireland.

www.youthworkireland.ie

ACCORD ‘Relationship & Sexuality School Programme’

Available to children from 11–18 years

www.accord.ie/services/schools-programmes

Keeping safe

In situations where there is violence or abuse or if one parent has a drug or alcohol dependency:

- Your teenager's and your own safety come first.
- You do not have to let any person have contact with you or your child if that puts you or your teenager at risk.
- Domestic abuse is very damaging for children and teenagers. Don't put them at risk. Get help now.
- Contact **Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline** 1800 341 900 or your local domestic abuse support service or refuge.
Email: info@womensaid.ie
www.womensaid.ie
- Contact Amen, a service for male victims of domestic abuse.
Tel: 046 902 3718
www.amen.ie
- You can also contact the Gardai at your local Garda station or if you are ever in danger call the Guards on 999
- See the booklet Parenting Positively: Helping teenagers to cope with Domestic Abuse (available from www.barnardos.ie)

CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT

If you have concerns that your teenage child may be at risk of abuse (i.e. physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect) or you have other concerns about their welfare:

- Contact your local Tusla social work office.
For contact details see www.tusla.ie
- Contact the Gardai at your local Garda station
- Contact CARI who provide a confidential help line service for anyone with concerns about sexual abuse of a child or young person.
Lo-call helpline: 1890 924567
Email: helpline@cari.ie
www.cari.ie

Useful reading

FOR TEENAGERS

When Parents Split – Support, Information and Encouragement for Teenagers

Glynis Good (2008) Blackhall Publishing

This is the first book to be published in Ireland to help teenagers cope with separation and divorce. The author works as a counsellor with the TEENBETWEEN support and counselling service. The book is available to buy on www.amazon.co.uk

FOR PARENTS

Children and Marital Separation (Leaflet). Clanwilliam Institute, Marriage and Family Institute.

Parents who listen, protect

HSE (2007) Published as part of a national initiative on child protection.

Your Mental Health: Information Booklet

HSE (2007 & 2009) Available from www.healthinfo.ie

Living with Separation & Divorce

Fiona McAuslan and Peter Nicholson (2011) Kite Books

Parenting Apart: How Separated and Divorced Parents can Raise Happy and Secure Children

Christina McGhee (2011) Vermillion

All quotes in this booklet come from young people who took part in the research study 'Children's Experiences of Parental Separation'. The study was undertaken by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin in 2002.

The term used to describe a parent who does not live permanently with a teenage child is the 'non-resident parent'.

Every care has been taken in preparing the content of this booklet, however Barnardos and Tusla - Child and Family Agency do not assume legal or other liability for inaccuracy, mistake or other errors. Information in this booklet is general information only and is not intended to be used as a substitute for advice and treatment from a qualified professional. Organisation contact details are shown for the convenience of the user and do not mean that Barnardos or Tusla - Child and Family Agency endorse these organisations. All photographs posed by models.

This booklet is one in a series on Parenting Positively. Parenting is a very rewarding job but one which can be difficult at times, especially when parents are faced with challenging situations. The aim of this series is to provide information and guidance to you, as a parent of a teenager, to help create a positive, loving and supportive relationship between you and your child.

The series covers teenage well-being as well as the complex life issues of death, separation and domestic abuse. The booklets outline teenager's understanding of the particular issue and how you can support them through this difficult time. Each booklet also gives further resources that you can follow up for more information and help on the issue covered.

There is also information for teenagers on these issues on www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp

Also in the series: Parenting Positively for parents of children aged 6–12. Booklets in this range cover a range of topics including death, bullying, separation and domestic abuse. For more information see www.barnardos.ie

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T: 01 771 8500 E: info@tusla.ie www.tusla.ie

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