



Helping Children Cope with Parent Separation

Parent separation or divorce is a major change for children. For primary school-aged children (approximately ages 5–11), it can bring feelings of sadness, worry, confusion, and fear about what life will look like next. This information sheet is designed to help parents support their children through separation in a calm, reassuring, and age-appropriate way.

How Primary School-Aged Children May Experience Separation

Children at this age are developing a stronger understanding of relationships and fairness, but they often still see the world in very personal terms. They may believe they caused the separation or worry about what it means for their future.

Common reactions include:

- Sadness, tearfulness, or mood changes
- Anger, irritability, or defiance
- Guilt or self-blame ("Is it my fault?")
- Anxiety about routines, living arrangements, or seeing each parent
- Worries about abandonment or further changes
- Changes in sleep, appetite, behaviour, or school performance

These reactions are normal responses to a big life change.

What Children Need Most

During separation, children benefit from:

- **Reassurance of love** from both parents
- **Consistency and predictability** where possible
- **Clear, simple explanations** they can understand
- **Permission to express feelings** without judgment
- **Freedom from adult conflict**

Talking to Your Child About the Separation

- **Explain it together if possible.** Hearing the message from both parents can feel reassuring.
- **Use simple, honest language.** Avoid blame or adult details.
- **Make it clear it is not their fault.** Repeat this often.
- **Reassure them about what will stay the same.** School, friends, routines, and love from both parents.
- **Invite questions.** Children may ask the same questions repeatedly as they process the change.

Example language:

"Mum and Dad have decided not to live together anymore. This is an adult decision and not because of anything you did. We both love you and will always be your parents."

Supporting Your Child Day to Day

- **Keep routines steady.** Regular mealtimes, school routines, and bedtimes help children feel safe.
- **Prepare them for changes.** Talk through where they will live and when they will see each parent.
- **Encourage expression.** Drawing, writing, play, or talking can help children share feelings.
- **Listen more than you talk.** Acknowledge feelings without trying to “fix” them straight away.
- **Model calm coping.** Children take cues from how adults manage emotions.

Helping Children with Two Homes

If your child is moving between homes:

- Keep rules and routines as similar as possible
- Use calendars or visual schedules to show where they will be
- Allow comfort items (toys, photos) to move between homes
- Support regular, positive contact with the other parent

What to Avoid

- Speaking negatively about the other parent in front of your child
- Asking children to take sides or carry messages
- Sharing legal, financial, or adult conflict details
- Using children for emotional support
- Making promises you cannot keep

Protecting children from conflict is one of the strongest factors in helping them adjust.

Supporting Children at School

It can help to inform your child’s teacher or school that a separation is happening. Children may:

- Have difficulty concentrating
- Be more emotional or tired
- Show changes in behaviour

Understanding and support at school can make a big difference.

When to Seek Extra Support

Consider seeking help from school or GP if your child:

- Shows ongoing distress that does not ease over time
- Has strong separation anxiety or fears about safety
- Becomes withdrawn or unusually aggressive
- Has significant sleep problems or physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches)

Early support can prevent longer-term difficulties.

Helpful Books for Primary School–Aged Children

Reading together can help children feel less alone and open conversations.

Ages 5–7

- **Two Homes** by Claire Masurel
- **My Family’s Changing** by Pat Thomas
- **The Family Book** by Todd Parr

Ages 7–9

- **Dinosaurs Divorce** by Laurene Krasny Brown & Marc Brown
- **When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends** by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos

Ages 9–11

- **The Suitcase Kid** by Jacqueline Wilson
- **Mum and Dad Glue** by Kes Gray

Final Thoughts

Parent separation is difficult, but children are resilient when they feel loved, safe, and protected from conflict. Honest communication, consistent care, and reassurance from both parents help primary school–aged children adjust and thrive over time.

This sheet can be shared with schools, counsellors, or other caregivers supporting your child.