

# My Family's splitting up

A guide for young people

# Why does it happen?

There are lots of reasons why parents decide to live apart and family arrangements have to change.

Here are some of the most common reasons:

- drifting apart
- seeing things differently
- wanting to go in different directions
- wanting to be with someone else

When adults decide to separate or divorce it is usually because one or both of them are unhappy and they believe the relationship needs to change.

These reasons are different for every family. If you don't understand why this is happening try asking your parents.

The changes in your family will affect you but remember you are not the reason why your parents are separating or divorcing.

“They were always arguing and they just seemed to stop liking each other.”

“ I wanted them to get back together and my brother and I were really upset when they said it was too late.”

“After a while you realise they are happier separated.”

# True or False?

It is not your fault that your parents are divorcing or separating.

Your parents are divorcing or separating from each other not you.

T

If your parents separate or divorce, you will have to choose which one you live with.

If your parents cannot agree, a decision will be made for them. However your views and wishes should be considered.

F

If your parents split up, they will still be your Mum and Dad.

Even if your parents break up for good, nothing can alter the fact that they are still your parents.

T

If you ignore your bad feelings they are more likely to go away.

Bad feelings are unlikely to go away. It is better to talk about your feelings than to bottle them up.

F

Parents splitting up is a stressful time for everyone - one minute you are feeling alright and the next minute confused and upset.

**Remember** that the way you feel now probably won't be the way you will feel forever.

Think about other changes in your life, e.g. a friend moving away, death of a pet, going into hospital, moving house.

**Have your feelings changed at all?**

EVENT  
FEELINGS THEN  
FEELINGS NOW

EVENT  
FEELINGS THEN  
FEELINGS NOW

EVENT  
FEELINGS THEN  
FEELINGS NOW

It's important to understand what is going on and to try to remember that everyone else in this situation has feelings too.

Their feelings may be different from yours and you may find that difficult to understand, but each person is different and people deal with situations in very different ways.

Tick some of the feelings you, your Mum and Dad may have experienced.

	You	Mum	Dad		You	Mum	Dad
Loved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Hopeful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Confused	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Stressed out	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Angry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Guilty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relieved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Let down	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scared	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Responsible	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Worried	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lost	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Happy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fed Up	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Embarrassed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Brave	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Ignored	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Unhappy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Depressed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Sometimes it can help to either share your feelings with someone else or to write your feelings in a diary.

# How do you feel?

It may help to think about why you feel the way you do.

Below, list three of the feelings that you ticked on the previous page and write down why you think you have felt/are feeling this way.

You could also use this list to help you to talk about your feelings with someone else.

I feel

\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I feel

\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I feel

\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

This page can be used to say why you think other members of your family are feeling the way they are.

Dad Feels

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Mum Feels

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# It's not just you

## Dean's story

Dean's parents are in the process of divorcing. Dean lives with his Mum and younger Sister and sees his Dad every other weekend.

When they first told me Dad was leaving I wasn't that surprised - they were always arguing. I was relieved they'd stopped arguing but I knew I'd miss Dad a lot. He promised that we'd still do things together and he's been really good about that. I do miss him when I'm watching stuff on TV that we used to watch together but it's okay really 'cos we still talk about it when I see him and sometimes he tapes things and we watch them at weekends.

## Gina's story

Gina's parents have been divorced for one year. Gina lives with her Mum and younger Brother and sees her Dad once a week.

I was gutted when they first told me. I knew something was going on but I thought they'd sort it out. Dad met someone else and he couldn't wait to leave and start a new life. It was hard at first, we felt abandoned and Mum was so upset, we hated seeing her cry all the time. Now she's got her life back together a bit, it's not so bad. But I still feel really angry about the way Dad left and how much he hurt my Mum.

### Dion's story

Dion's Mum left home to live with her new partner. Dion lives with his Dad and twin Brother. He sees his Mum once a week.

### Joanne's story

Joanne's parents separated two years ago. Joanne lives with her Mum and a younger Brother and doesn't see her Dad very often.

Mum went at a bad time for all of us, like in the middle of our GCSE's! She said she couldn't stand it anymore. Now I see how much happier she is, it's good but she left us in a bit of a mess and I'm still angry about that. We have to help out a lot more with cooking and house stuff but I quite enjoy it now - it's like practice for going away to college and Dad's a really good cook.

I couldn't really talk to my parents, they were always slagging each other off and I'd get stuck in the middle. They kept saying I didn't understand but how could I when they wouldn't tell me anything? I talked to my Nan and she said "They are very angry with each other but not with you", but it didn't always feel like that. She said they needed time to sort it out. It helped to talk to Nan and she was right. I miss Dad but life at home is happier and calmer.

# It's not just you

## Tom's story

Tom's parents separated when he was seven years old. His father went to live and work in Germany a year later. Tom lives with his Mum and her new partner Sean.

## Lee's story

Lee's Mum left home two years ago to live with her new partner. Lee lives with his Dad and sees Mum some weekends.

I started to feel that I don't know my Dad. I hardly ever see him because he only comes to England about once a year and even then I don't always see him because he's usually busy. So when I got my computer I decided to email him - I phoned my Gran and she gave me the address. I've been writing to Dad every week for about three months now and it's great. Mum says don't bank on him keeping it up but I wanted to do *something* and I have.

I got really sick of talking about it. Mum and Dad were always asking me how I felt and everyone was waiting for some big reaction. I like listening to music so I would just go to my room, lie on the bed and just relax, no big deal. It is good to talk sometimes but only when you want to - everyone handles things in their own way. At 17, I need to start thinking about my own life and I would rather talk about that.

## Emmie's story

Emmie's Dad left home three years ago. Emmie lives with her Mum and Brother. Her Brother sees their Dad but Emmie hasn't seen him since he left.

I was glad when my Dad left, I didn't want to see him again. He was so violent. Then he asked the court if I could visit him on weekends. I didn't feel there was anyone that I could talk to so I rang ChildLine and told them why. They listened to me and helped me to think who else I could talk to. I spoke to my Auntie who talked to my Mum. She now knows everything, I'm glad I talked to someone.

## Charlotte's story

Charlotte's Dad left home four years ago. Charlotte lives with her younger Brother, Mum, her new partner (Matt) and his two younger children (Cate and Liam).

Before, there was just Mum, Dad, me and my Brother but now there's seven of us. I hate it, it feels like we've been invaded. I get really angry when Mum hasn't time to listen to me. I wish Matt would go away, he's not my Dad and I don't think he should tell me what to do. Now we all have to get together once a week for a 'family' meeting to talk things through. My Brother thinks it's really useful but I just think it's a way for Matt to lay the law down.

# Where do we go from here?

Change is part of life. When you think about it, things change all the time.

**We become attached to the way things are and feel safe, so the hardest part of change is often the fear of the unknown.**

Some changes in your family situation may have happened already and there may be things that will change in the future.

It will help you and your parents when talking about the future if you are clear about which things really matter to you.

**Your parents have to sort out arrangements for your changing family.**

**Which areas of change are most important for you to discuss with your parents?**

**It may help to jot down some of the things that are important to you about the possible changes in your family situation.**

● **Where are you going to live?**

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● **Is there a possibility that you might have to change schools?**

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- Who do you want to spend time with in the school holidays?

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- Who will come to school events, e.g. parents' evenings, sports, plays?

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- Who do you want to stay in touch with?

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.....

- When would you like that to be?

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.....

- How will you keep up with your school activities?

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.....

- Anything else?

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.....

When you are living apart from a parent, family member or friend you may need to find new ways of keeping in touch. You may be able to phone, write a letter or email.

# Where does this leave me?

What you feel and think is very important  
You have a right to be listened to  
You have a right to say what you feel

But this does not mean that everything will happen exactly as you would like it to - there may be good reasons why some things are not possible.

But if your parents know how you feel because you've talked to them yourself, it will help them to look at things from your point of view.

## Have your say

Right now - what are the three most important things you would like your parents to consider?

1

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2

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3

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## Don't keep the lid on your feelings.

Sometimes it can be hard to know how to start talking to your parents. You may be worried about upsetting them. If it is important to you, try to let them know how you feel, it should get easier once you've started talking.

## Try different ways of saying things - which work best for you?



Ask a question.

*What's going to happen to Oscar (the dog) if Dad goes?*



Make a statement followed by a question.

*Oscar's staying here Dad, isn't he?*



Make a statement.

*Where Oscar goes, I go too!*

There is no guarantee that everything will work out just the way you would like it to. Your parents will want to make decisions in everyone's best interests and you can help by telling them how you feel - if you leave them to guess, they may get it wrong.



# Talk it over - Talk it out

Parents are often the best people to talk to but if they are very involved in what's going on then it can be a good idea to talk to someone else as well.

Who are the people you can talk to? Tick the boxes below.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> teacher or youth worker | <input type="checkbox"/> cousins   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> friends                 | <input type="checkbox"/> a friend's mum  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gran or grandad         | <input type="checkbox"/> someone you know who has been through something similar |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aunt or uncle           | <input type="checkbox"/> a helpline, see Helplines list                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sister or brother       |  |

Make a list of some of the things that you would like to talk about, below.

Remember if you want to keep your conversation private make this clear to the person you are talking to. However, if an adult you talk to thinks you may be at risk of harm, they may have to tell someone, to protect you.

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

# What happens next?



A marriage can only be ended by an order from the County Court.

- Usually, it is not necessary to go to the court for a divorce, matters are dealt with by post. Your parents may talk to and get advice from lawyers or talk to mediators about how best to agree future plans.
- To start divorce proceedings, one of your parents sends a form, called a 'divorce petition', to the court, setting out the reasons why they think they should be given a divorce. A copy is sent by post to the other parent.
- They also fill out a form, called a 'statement of arrangements', telling the court what they plan is to happen with the children in the family after the divorce is given. They set out where you will live, what contact you will have with your other parent, your education, any medical needs you have and any child care arrangements they will make. They may also include details of maintenance or child support. The arrangements may be agreed between your parents but don't have to be. You should have been asked what you think should happen.
- A district judge goes through the petition and the statement of arrangements and if he or she is satisfied that they are in order and that a divorce should be granted, makes an order, called a 'decree nisi' of divorce. This says that a divorce can be granted - but the marriage is not over at this stage. Sometimes, if the district judge is not satisfied with the information on the papers, your parents may have to provide more details or may have to go to the court to talk to the district judge or a Children and Family Reporter from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service.
- Not less than six weeks after the decree nisi, your parents can ask for the divorce to be made final - the district judge grants an order called a 'decree absolute'. It is only at this point that the marriage is legally over.

TURN OVER FOR AN EXPLANATION OF THE TERMS USED

## What if your parents can't agree on future arrangements for you?

- The Judge can make decisions for them, under the 'Children Act', and these are called 'Court Orders'.
- There might be a Residence Order - which says who you will live with, or it might be a Contact Order - which deals with the arrangements for visiting, phoning and having contact with the parent who doesn't live with you anymore.
- If the Judge is asked to make decisions about residence or contact, they may ask a Children and Family Reporter to talk to your parents or you and then advise the court on the best arrangements.
- When the Judge has all the information to make a decision, a Court Hearing may be called to discuss the arrangements. Children and Young People are not usually called to the court because it is the job of the Children and Family Reporter to make sure that their views are passed on to the Judge.



**County Court:** A Court for your local area, quite separate from the Courts which deal with crime.

**Lawyers:** Specialists on the law who may help a parent to make arrangements and speak for a parent in court if there is a dispute.

**Mediators:** people who are trained in helping parents to reach an agreement about future arrangements.

**Divorce proceedings:** The different steps over a certain time which people have to follow in order to obtain a legal divorce.

**Divorce petition:** The form which is sent to the court setting out why a person wants a divorce.

**Statement of arrangements:** The form sent with the petition, explaining the arrangements for the children in the family after the divorce.

**Maintenance or child support:** Money paid by the parent you don't live with to meet your everyday needs. If your parents agree on the amount of money, it can be ordered by the court dealing with their divorce, and is called 'maintenance'. If they cannot agree or the parent you live with is on social security benefits, the amount is fixed by the Child Support Agency, when it is called 'child support'.

**Decree nisi:** This is the order made by the district judge saying that the divorce can be given.

**Decree absolute:** This is the order that legally ends the marriage.

**District judge:** The judge who usually deals with all the orders.

**Court Order/residence/contact order:** Legal orders made by the judge in court.

**Children and Family Reporter:** An official from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service who advises the court.

**Court hearing:** meeting between the judge and your parents to hear what everyone has to say.

All 0800 numbers are free of charge. You don't need a phone card or money, and they won't show up on the phone bill. They are usually very busy, so keep trying.

**ChildLine**

0800 1111

Freephone 24 hours a day

**Children's Legal Centre**

01206 873820

10am-12.30pm, 2-4.30pm  
weekdays**Cruse Bereavement Care**

020 8332 7227

Help, advice and support if a  
relative or a friend has died.Lines are open every day,  
including weekends**Get Connected**

0800 096-0096

Free national helpline for  
young people**National Youth Advocacy Service**

0151 649 8700

Freephone 9am-9pm,  
Mon-Fri, 2-8pm weekends  
Information, advice and  
representation (someone  
who can speak for you)**NSPCC Helpline**

0800 800500

Freephone 24 hours a day  
Counselling, information and  
advice for children at risk of  
abuse**Samaritans**

08457 909090

Freephone 24 hours a day  
Advice and support if you feel  
really unhappy and depressed**Who Cares? Linkline**

0500 564570

Freephone 3.30-6pm, Mon,  
Wed, ThursdayAdvice and support if you are  
or have been in care**Youth Access**

020 8772 9900

9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri  
Will tell you where to go for  
help locally



## Websites

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

A counselling website for children.

[www.carelaw.org.uk](http://www.carelaw.org.uk)

Free website for young people in care, offers information on the law and your rights.

[www.justask.org.uk](http://www.justask.org.uk)

Free website offers information, help and advice on legal services.

[www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

Free website for all the family

[www.thesite.org.uk](http://www.thesite.org.uk)

Free website for young people (15-24 years) offering information, help and advice.

Directory of advisory services for young people covering the whole of the UK.

## Books

### Parent problems!

Children's views on life when parents split up

Bren Neale & Amanda Wade. Young Voice

### The Suitcase Kid

Jacqueline Wilson. Corgi Yearling

### Caught In The Middle:

Teenagers talk about their parents' divorce.

Alys Swan Jackson. Piccadilly Press

### Can Brook survive her new stepfamily?

Clare Harding. Pan Books.

### Children don't divorce

Rosemary Stories. Harper Collins.

### It's Not The End of the World

Judy Blume. Pan Piper

### Madam Doubtfire

Ann Fine. Penguin Books

### Talking Points: Divorce

Ann Charlich. Wayland

### It's not your fault. What to do when your parents divorce.

Rosemary Stories. Piccadilly Press

### Keeping in touch.

How to help your child after separation and divorce

Dr Tufnell & P. M. Harris. Young Minds

A large, empty white rectangular area intended for writing notes, framed by a yellow border. The page features a yellow background with faint, overlapping circular patterns in the bottom section.

Thank you to all the children and young people who helped to develop this leaflet.

Developed by childcare and family support practitioners and researchers for the Lord Chancellor's Department.



For further copies of this leaflet please contact:  
FREEPOST, PO BOX 2001, Burgess Hill, West Sussex RH15 8BR.

This leaflet is also available on our website [www.lcd.gov.uk](http://www.lcd.gov.uk)