

This fact sheet is for parents who are thinking about separation or have separated. It explains:

- how to talk with your children about the separation
- how children may react
- how to help your children understand and feel more comfortable with the separation
- where to get help.

How do we explain our separation to our children?

Separation is often a surprise for children and can make them feel confused and anxious. You can help your children by talking with them about the separation. This helps them make sense of what has happened.

Children cope better with one simple statement using words they understand. It is best to tell all your children together at the same time. An example of a statement is:

We have been unhappy with each other for some time. We don't want to fight anymore. We feel we will be happier living in different places. We will still see you and take care of you, but in different homes. We both love you all very much.

When should we talk with the children?

It is best to talk with your children about the separation, before you separate. This helps children prepare for the changes in their lives. Sometimes this is not possible, for example if your separation has happened suddenly or if you cannot talk with the children together with the other parent because of issues such as family violence.

It is still important to explain to children what has happened in words they understand.

What information should we include when talking with our children?

It is important to let your children know that their views and feelings are important. But let them know that it is your role and the other parent's role to make the decisions. Children may feel relieved when they realise their parents will make the decisions, and they may be more open about how they feel.

It is very important to:

- explain to your children that they are not to blame
- explain that they cannot change or stop the separation
- explain the new arrangements in detail, for example where they will live and when they will see the other parent, new routines for schools, pets, and seeing friends and other family
- reassure them that though things will be different, you will still be there and always love them
- set aside time for your children's questions; listen and be sensitive to what they are feeling

- let them know that it is ok to have views and feelings that are different from yours. For example, if you feel angry with the other parent, it is still ok for your children to love their parent. It is important you keep your feelings separate from your children's, especially when you are listening to them.

You should also make sure that you don't:

- say negative things about the other parent to your children. Children usually love both parents and it is important not to damage the relationship your children have with their other parent.
- pressure your children to make decisions about where they want to live and how much time they spend with the other parent.

Who else should we talk with?

It is helpful to tell other important people in the children's lives about the separation. People such as school teachers, childcare workers, close relatives and friends can often help support your children through this time.

How will our children react to our separation?

Often children's reactions come out in behaviour, not words. Your children may start acting differently, perhaps going back to baby talk, or falling back with toilet training, or they may start having difficulties at school.

Your children's reactions should settle down in time. This is more likely to happen if you have practical arrangements with the other parent. However, if the changes in your children's behaviour are big, affect other parts of their lives, continue for some time, or are a concern to you, you may need to get help. You could try:

- talking with the other parent
- getting advice from the children's school
- getting help from a doctor or professional who specialises in children.

If it is difficult to speak with the other parent, you can try family dispute resolution. This is where an independent mediator helps you both come to agreement about the children. Our service is called Victoria Legal Aid Family Dispute Resolution Service. See [Where to get help](#) for more details of this and other services that can help you.

What can cause our children to have negative reactions to the separation?

Conflict between you and the other parent (or other family members) can cause stress for your children. Things that can cause stress for them include:

- arguments with the other parent
- physical violence
- difficulty having any contact with either parent
- one parent saying bad things about the other parent.

Other things that can cause your children to have negative reactions to the separation include:

- money problems caused by the separation. The children's lives may be changed because of these, for example, they may not be able to go on school excursions any more.
- your children not seeing the other parent as much anymore or losing contact altogether
- your own reaction to the separation. It may be difficult for you to look after your children's needs if you are feeling angry or depressed or are having to work more since the separation. It is important to get help if you are finding it hard to care for yourself or your children.

How can we help our children cope better with the separation?

Each child is different. Their own personality will affect how they respond to the separation. Some children will need more help than others to cope with the changes.

You can help your children cope better with the separation by:

- sorting out arguments or differences with the other parent away from the children
- helping the children not to feel responsible for yours and the other parent's decisions
- putting the children's needs first
- helping the other parent remain involved in the children's lives if this is in the children's best interests
- helping your children to have close, loving relationships with other family members, such as grandparents and family friends
- keeping up activities that the children enjoy.

Where to get help

Victoria Legal Aid

Legal Help

Tel: 1300 792 387

Open Monday to Friday, 8.45 am to 5.15 pm

You can get legal information and help regarding separation, divorce, children, property and residency issues.

For more information about children, adults and separation, see our other information sheets:

- Being a parent after separation
- Caring for yourself after separation
- How your children's ages affect your parenting arrangements
- Family violence – how Victoria Legal Aid Family Dispute Resolution Service can help

For your nearest community legal centre:

Tel: 9652 1500

www.communitylaw.org.au

Family Relationship Advice Line

Tel: 1800 050 321 or visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au

for locations of Family Relationship Centres and other services that can help you reach agreement about the children.

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