

Making arrangements for your children

A Parenting Through Separation programme factsheet

Your children need both parents

- They need you and your former partner to work together to make the big decisions for them until they're 18.
- It may be difficult for them to develop a full sense of who they are if they don't have a relationship with both of you.
- They need your family/whānau to support them in keeping up all their important relationships, including with your former partner and their family/whānau.

The law encourages you to make arrangements between yourselves

- Support is available to help you make your own arrangements for your children. You can go to a Parenting Through Separation course, get advice from a family lawyer and try Family Dispute Resolution.
- When you've worked out your arrangements, it's best to write them down as an agreement. This makes everything clear and there's less chance of disagreement later on.
- Many parents use our 'Making a Parenting Plan' workbook to keep track of their arrangements.
- You can ask the Family Court to make your agreement into a Parenting Order. This means if one person isn't sticking to the agreement, the court can take steps to make sure they do.

The law says you must put your children's needs first when you make arrangements for them

- Don't use your children to punish your former partner.
- Be honest about what you know is best for your children and what each of you do best as a parent.
- Different arrangements are needed for children of different ages. Also consider things like your hours of work or the distance between your homes.
- If there's often conflict at changeovers, avoid contact with the other parent by making the changeover at school or the home of someone who won't take sides.

Let your children have a say but don't ask them to choose between you

- Ask them gently if they want to tell you their ideas about arrangements.
- Respect their views. If you have to make different arrangements from what they want, explain why.
- Respect their right to say nothing – you may unsettle them if you pressure them into making choices when they don't want to.
- Let them rely on you and your former partner to make the decisions – it's your responsibility as the adults.

Arrangements will need to change as your children's needs change

- They'll probably go through stages when they need to be with one parent more than the other (try not to take this personally).
- Well thought-out arrangements include a regular time (6-monthly or yearly) to get together and make changes.

Going to the Family Court should be a last resort

- Children cope more easily with separation when they see their parents deciding together how they'll be cared for.
- The costs, delays and conflict often involved in going to court can be stressful for everyone. You lose control of the outcome by going to court. You hand over the decision-making to a judge and you may end up with a decision that neither of you like.
- Sometimes Family Court protection is needed when there are safety or addiction issues, or when one parent is trying to use their power over the other.

To find out more, go to
justice.govt.nz/family/relationship-break-up/

Getting on as separated parents

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Your children need you to get on with their other parent and plan for them together from now on

- There are different degrees of getting on with your former partner.
- What children like best is when their separated parents talk often to make plans and arrangements for them, and they can both be at the same important events.
- It's also OK for children if their parents don't talk directly or see each other but still work together and put up with differences without complaining.
- What doesn't work well for children is if you're angry with their other parent and they see you fighting.
- If the other parent isn't around, you'll have to help your children deal with their feelings about not seeing them.

When you need to have parenting discussions, it'll help if you just focus on your children's needs

- It's a good idea to separate your adult relationship problems from parenting issues and make sure you deal with them at different times.
- When you're talking about parenting, treat your former partner respectfully as a parent, no matter how you see them in terms of your adult relationship.
- If the other parent raises relationship issues when you're talking about parenting, agree to deal with them at some other time.

It's better for your children when you trust each other's parenting; this usually gets easier over time

- It's easy to lose sight of the fact that your former partner also loves the children.
- Put up with different parenting styles. Parenting doesn't have to be perfect. Children can get used to different routines and practices.
- Make sure that you're prepared and able to look after them when they're with you, if something goes wrong.

Tips for better communication

- Choose carefully where you have your parenting discussions. Make sure the children can't hear what you're talking about.
- Have a regular meeting or phone call about your children so that you keep up the habit of communicating.
- Don't wait for something to go wrong; it'll be harder to sort things out.
- If meetings get tense, try holding them in a public place like a park or café.
- Only make phone calls about your children when they can't overhear what you're saying.
- If contact is difficult in person or by phone, try emailing or texting but be careful as there's much more room for misunderstandings this way.
- Try using a notebook that's always with your child. Use it to write down messages to the other parent about things like medicines, homework and washing.
- Use 'I/when/because' statements rather than 'you' statements.
- If you're having trouble communicating, try other programmes and courses, for example, on communication or parenting skills.
- If contact with the other parent always ends in conflict then try communicating instead through a third person (perhaps a friend or whānau).
- A Family Dispute Resolution provider may be able to help you find ways of communicating without arguing.