

# Putting your children first

A parent's guide to caring for children after separation.



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Separating can be a stressful time. When children are involved, you need to set aside relationship issues and work out how they'll be cared for.

Children can't see the situation in an adult way. They view the world from their own perspective because they don't have the experience to see the bigger picture. This may sometimes seem hurtful and unfair but you need to understand.

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## Keeping children and their families together

Your children need both parents in their lives, regardless of the issues in your relationship. They also need their family and whānau. Having grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and friends in their life is important. Making sure children maintain these relationships is important for their wellbeing.

The best decisions for your children are where:

- you both cooperate
- you and your children (when they're old enough to tell you what they think) work together to sort

out how you will care for them in the future

- you reach agreement without fighting and arguing
- you encourage your children to talk about their feelings and be involved in future plans. This will help them adapt to their new lives
- you both stick to what you agree but stay flexible and cooperate if something needs to change for your children's sake
- there are as few changes as possible to other parts of your children's lives.

If your former partner wants a plan you don't like:

- remember, it's important that children keep seeing their other parent, if possible
- keep encouraging your former partner to put the children's needs and interests first
- remember that time not seeing one parent seems much longer for children, especially for children aged six or younger

- remember that even a short time without contact can be hard for children.

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## If my feelings take over

Things will get worse if you let your feelings take over because you're more likely to:

- be unreasonable and not think clearly about what's best for your children
- try to get your children to take sides
- punish your former partner
- try and get revenge
- remove your former partner from your children's lives.

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## Understanding what's best for your children

- Accept your feelings towards your former partner.
- Stop blaming yourself and your former partner.
- Talk with your former partner. If it's difficult to do this, you can get help.
- Take positive steps to help yourself cope.

## Ideas for coping

- Organise support from friends and whānau.
- Tell friends and whānau what's happening and what they can do to help. Make sure you keep in touch.
- Ask for help to look after your children when you need a break.
- Take good care of your health, especially:
  - eat well and get some exercise
  - get as much sleep as you can.
- Remember, it's OK to cry.
- Don't rely on drink or drugs. You'll be able to deal better with what's going on for you and your children without these things. Call the Alcohol Drug Helpline on 0800 787 797 if you need help.
- Get professional support if you're not coping. This could be from:
  - your health professional
  - a counsellor at your child's school
  - a professional counsellor (which you'll have to pay for)
  - social support agencies or parent groups.

- Talk to other separated parents you know.
- Try to make new friends if you're living in a new area.
- Keep a diary. Write about how you and your children feel. Over time, you'll see how you feel stronger and that things have progressed.
- Be strong for your children. It helps if you focus on what you know will make your children happy.

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## Helping your children cope during separation

When parents split up, children often:

- feel confused and insecure because they don't understand what's happening
- blame themselves
- cover up their emotions.

You might think your children are OK because you're too busy just coping to notice what's going on for them.

Remember:

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

Talking with your children is important – keep communication open.

- Find time for your children to be alone with you without distractions (car trips can be good).
- Ask them if they have questions about what's happening.
- Ask them how they feel. Listen to your children and show them you're listening.

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## How can I make sure our children have a say?

- Work as a team with your children to make the best possible arrangements for their future.
- Always ask for their views.
- Children older than 11 are especially likely to have views about the future.
- Don't pressure your children to make choices.

## Take your children's views into account

If your children tell you what they want:

- try to fit their wishes into the plans
  - if this can't be done, explain why.
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## Reassure your children

Tell your children many times:

- it isn't their fault that you're splitting up
- you still love them even though you've split up
- splitting up is common.

Also:

- be affectionate – give your children lots of hugs
- just listen – don't feel you have to fix their feelings. It's painful and you can't change that.
- by listening, you can help them feel understood.

## What if I'm thinking about moving?

Talk about it with your former partner first. This could make the separation more difficult for your children, especially if it means:

- being apart from their other parent
  - a break in contact with family/whānau and friends
  - starting a new school.
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## What if my former partner has moved away?

Many parents live apart in ways that make weekly or even monthly contact difficult with their children. Don't let this stop you encouraging your children to have contact.

- Keep in contact by phone or online.
- Look out for cheap calling specials and cheap airfares.
- Use video calling and messaging apps to stay in touch.
- Use the school holidays and plan contact well ahead.

## What can I expect from my children when I have a new partner?

New partners may make the separation harder for your children to cope with, so be patient. Children often feel they can't accept your new partner without feeling disloyal to their other parent. Here are some practical things that can help:

- make time for your child to be with you without your new partner
- be sensitive to your children's emotions and needs when introducing a new partner
- listen to what your children say about your new partner without feeling you have to change their minds or agree with them
- understand your child's point of view
- insist that your children are polite to your new partner but don't expect them to see them as a parent
- don't ask your children to call the new partner 'mum' or 'dad'.

## What if my new partner has their own children?

Step-families can be very difficult for children to adjust to on top of your splitting up, so again be patient. Ask your children to tell you how they feel about the situation, listen to what they say and try to help.

Family Dispute Resolution allows you and your former partner to work out arrangements for your children in a neutral environment with an independent mediator. There's also a free information programme for parents called Parenting Through Separation.

[justice.govt.nz/family](https://www.justice.govt.nz/family)

## Counselling and support

### **Barnardos**

Phone 0800 BARNARDOS  
(0800 227 627)  
barnardos.org.nz

### **Family Works**

Provided by Presbyterian Support Services.  
Parenting and family violence programmes;  
family and child counselling.  
Phone 04 473 5164  
familyworks.org.nz

### **Lifeline Aotearoa**

Phone 0800 543 354 available 24 hours, seven  
days a week  
lifeline.org.nz

### **Te Rōpū Wāhine Māori Toko i te Ora – Māori Women's Welfare League, Whānau Toko i te Ora**

Parenting programme for under-five-year-olds.  
Branches throughout New Zealand.  
Phone 04 473 6451  
Email admin@mwwl.org.nz

### **Skylight**

Counselling and support for children of all ages.  
Phone 0800 299 100, weekdays 9am–5pm  
skylight.org.nz



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