FAMILY SEPARATION

A GUIDE FOR Teens

October 2007
DO YOU NEED INTERPRETING HELP?
If you don’t speak English and need help from CSA, ring the Telephone Interpreting Service on 131 450.

Disclaimer
The information in this booklet is provided as a guide only on the understanding that the Australian Government is not providing professional advice. The Child Support Agency recommends that users seek professional advice for their particular circumstances.

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Other free booklets available in this series

Me and My Kids
Practical ideas for separated parents on developing and maintaining relationships with your kids after separation – particularly for parents who spend much of their time away from their children.

Me and My Money
Addresses the challenges that arise around money issues following separation. Includes hints and tips on stretching your dollar further.

What About Me?
Helping separated parents deal with emotional issues such as anxiety – with suggestions and resources for dealing with them.

Me, My Kids and My Ex
Providing helpful tips and hints on reducing conflict and building a workable relationship with the other parent, for the benefit of the kids.

Me and My Changing Family
Deals with issues that affect separated families when parents re-partner. Includes tips on building healthy relationships after separation.

Dealing with Separation
An interactive CD-ROM where real people in real situations share their experiences, tips and tools about navigating their way through separation.

Order copies at www.csa.gov.au or by calling 1800 040 972.
You are not alone. Around 11 000 teenagers experience family separation in Australia each year.

This booklet is just for you. Separation can take place over months or years. During this time you’ll have many emotions and changes in your life. It can be a confusing and difficult time for everyone. You may be going through some enormous changes. This booklet aims to give you some tips and help you understand and cope with what’s going on around you.

WHAT IS THE CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY?
The Child Support Agency (CSA) helps ensure children can rely on their parents for the financial and emotional support necessary for their wellbeing. We have more than 4000 staff across the country supporting around 1.5 million parents to transfer payments for the benefit of 1.2 million children. For more information about the CSA visit www.csa.gov.au or call 131 272.

We recognise separation can be a challenge for teenagers, so we’ve worked with a range of people to make this booklet as helpful and useful as possible.

‘I wouldn’t seek out information to help me deal with mum and dad’s separation, but only because I wouldn’t think that it existed—that anyone else was going through a similar thing to me’

Sean, aged 16

‘This booklet makes you think about things you haven’t thought about before … it would have been good to know some of this stuff when my parents were separating’

Christy, aged 18
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CSA would like to thank the following organisations for their input:
Anglicare NSW
Australian General Practice Network
Australian Parenting and Relationships Helpline
Attorney-General’s Department
Australian Institute of Family Studies
beyondblue: the national depression initiative
Catholic Social Services Australia
Crisis Support Services
dads in distress
Defence Community Organisation
Department of Education, Science and Training
Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Dr Michael Carr-Gregg – Adolescent Psychologist
Families Australia
Family Court of Australia
Farrer Gesini and Dunn
Federal Magistrates Court of Australia
headspace: National Youth Mental Health Foundation
Interrelate Family Centres
Kids Help Line
Legal Aid (ACT)
Lone Fathers Association of Australia
Menslink
National Council of Single Mothers and their Children
Parentingideas
Relationships Australia
Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families, Victoria University of Wellington
Sole Parents’ Union of Australia
During and after your parents separate you might feel a range of emotions, such as shock, relief, anger and sadness.

**COMMON EMOTIONS**

- shocked
- distressed
- ashamed
- relieved
- scared
- embarrassed
- hopeful
- worried
- disappointed
- angry
- irritable
- guilty
- rejected
- happy
- loved
- sad
- withdrawn
- torn
- confused
- relaxed
- lonely
- excited
- insecure
- normal
It’s normal to experience any or all of the emotions on page four. Separation and divorce is one of the most difficult situations a person can go through. It is likely that the other members of your family might feel the same.

Emotions don’t last, they shift and change. It’s normal to feel angry one minute and sad the next. It’s okay to feel happy sometimes. Give yourself time to work through each of the emotions you experience and talk to someone you trust about them when you need to.

**IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT**

Often teenagers whose parents have separated wonder if it is their fault and blame themselves. It’s not your fault. You are not responsible for your parents’ actions.

‘You need to know your parents aren’t angry at you’

Scott, aged 14

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**Important to remember**

You are not alone. There are thousands of people like you. Some of your friends might be going through the same thing. They may be experiencing similar emotions to you and it could help to talk to them.
It’s not your fault. Nothing you said or did is responsible for their decision to separate.

TIPS FOR DEALING WITH EMOTIONS

- **Talk to someone.** Talking to a close friend or relative can be a good way to deal with your emotions. They may tell you about a time they experienced the same emotion, or they may just listen and provide support. You could also talk to one or both of your parents about how you feel. Your parents can provide comfort and support and might answer some questions about the separation.

- **Crying.** It’s okay to cry. It’s a normal reaction.

- **Write things down.** If you don’t feel comfortable talking to someone about your feelings, you might want to write them down in a diary or journal.

- **Ask your parents what they need from you.** Sometimes, talking to your parents about what they expect from you, such as doing the dishes, can help you work out what you need to be doing and what someone else can sort out. It can also give you an opportunity to set some limits with your parents and tell them if some of the things they expect from you are getting too much for you to handle.

- **Spend time doing things you enjoy.** This could be playing a sport, listening to music, going for a walk, shopping, reading or watching a movie.
‘When I feel upset I put on my favourite sad movie and have a good cry… it’s not a solution to my parents fighting, but it always makes me feel a lot better’

Holly, aged 17

How are those around you reacting to the situation?

Everyone copes with stress differently. However, if you are worried about your parents, brothers or sisters (for instance, if they are angry all the time, or they spend all their time by themselves), you can try talking to them about the situation, or contacting any of the services on page nine for some advice. This is particularly important if you think the situation is not going to get better or that your family member or friend may harm themselves or you.

Give yourself time

Separation can be very stressful and it’s normal to need time to sort through your emotions and adapt to your changing situation.
WHAT TO DO IF YOUR EMOTIONS DON’T CHANGE

When emotions such as sadness won’t go away, it’s a good idea to talk to someone. Talk to someone you trust, like a parent or friend, about the way you feel, or contact a professional counsellor by phone or online. Many of the services listed below are free.

- Call Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800, or visit www.kidshelp.com.au to talk to a counsellor online
- Call lifeline on 131 114 (for the cost of a local call)
- www.moodgym.anu.edu.au
- www.reachout.com.au
- School counsellor/teacher
- Psychologist
- Sporting coach
- Youth worker
- Religious leader
- A friend’s parent

A WORD OF ADVICE

Separation can feel like a real loss. As much as you might wish it wasn’t happening, your parents’ relationship is between them. Focus your energy on doing what you need to do to get through this time.
There are legal rights and basic human rights to which you are entitled.

During and after the separation, you have a right to:

- a meaningful relationship with both your parents
- be protected from abuse, neglect or family violence
- receive adequate and proper parenting to help you achieve your full potential
- know and be cared for by both parents
- spend time with and communicate with both parents and other significant people, such as grandparents and other relatives
- the support and encouragement necessary to maintain a connection with your culture.¹

¹ Refer to the Australian Family Law Act 1975 (60B) www.familycourt.gov.au
What are my rights?
You have the right to express your views and have them heard.

You are also entitled to basic human rights including:

- living free from violence and abuse (and this includes being free from witnessing violence and abuse)
- an education in a place that is free from bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence
- being treated with fairness and dignity
- feeling safe
- being heard
- expressing your views and having them heard, (if you are capable of forming your own views).

For more information about your basic human rights visit www.ncylc.org.au/croc/home.html

IMPORTANT!

Your parents have a legal duty to look after you until you are 18. They must provide you with food, shelter and clothing, education and protection. Separation does not generally change the legal duties your parents have towards you.

THE LEGAL PROCESS

Your parents, with your input, will need to decide where you live, what school you go to and when you visit each parent after the separation. They may work this out themselves, visit a Family Relationship Centre, use a mediator, or go through the Family Law Courts.

You have a right to say as much or as little as you want. Your parents, or the Courts, will take your views into consideration before a final decision is made in your best interests. You can be part of the discussions through your parents, a mediator or a counsellor (family consultant) from the Family Court.
If after making a genuine effort to resolve their issues, your parents decide to go to court, the judge will want to know what you think. The judge must consider your wishes. The courts may arrange for you to talk with a counsellor (family consultant). The family consultant helps the judge make a decision that is in your best interests. You do not go into the court room, so the family consultant speaks on your behalf. In some circumstances, the court may also arrange for a lawyer (called an Independent Children’s Lawyer) to help the judge decide what’s best for you.

The family consultant can answer your questions, listen to your views and tell the judge what you want. How much or how little you say is up to you, but it’s okay to say what you think. You should tell the family consultant, or another adult you trust, if someone else has told you what to say. You should also tell them if you feel unsafe for any reason.

Your parents or the family consultant will explain the court’s decision to you. You have the right to understand why the decision was made and how it will affect you.

For more information about your rights and the family court processes contact the Family Court of Australia on 1300 352 000 or visit

- [www.lawstuff.org.au](http://www.lawstuff.org.au)

**CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS AND MAINTENANCE ORDERS**

Child support payments will stop when you turn 18. If you are still finishing year 12 at the time, your parents can apply before you turn 18 to extend your child support until the end of the school year.

The Family Court can make a special order for financial support so you can do further study after year 12. Ask your mum or dad to contact the Family Court of Australia on 1300 352 000 or consider making their own private arrangement.
Separation is not necessarily a bad thing. If your parents’ situation has made you miserable, the separation is a chance for a new start.

Your family will still be your family, even after the separation. However, there will be changes, such as living arrangements. But families are not just about who lives with who, they are about loving and caring for each other.

Different types of families

In Australia, there’s so many different kinds of families: single parent, couples, same-sex parents and share-care parents. And with any type of family, not everyone lives together under one roof. When you move out of home, you’re still part of a family.
Your relationship with your parents

Your parents may not get along. This does not mean they will have a bad relationship with you. It may be difficult to spend time with both of them, especially if one of them is living some distance away. However, it is still possible for you to maintain a relationship with both parents if you want to.

- Spend some time alone with each of your parents, or at least talk on the phone or write emails or letters. You can talk to them about how you are feeling about the separation and ask them how they are feeling. You can talk about something different, like school, or do something together that you both enjoy, like shopping or sport.

- If your parents argue in front of you, try to stay out of it. You have the right to ask them to stop arguing in front of you, or walk away. One positive outcome of the separation is there could be less fighting in your home now your parents don’t live together.

‘Mum and dad don’t fight any more’

Michael, aged 13

- It’s not okay for parents to be violent to each other, to you, or to someone else in your family. There are things that can be done to stop the violence. Go to the section on Safety (page 34) to find out more.

- Don’t get caught in the middle. You do not have to spy on your parents. If one parent asks you things about the other parent that makes you feel uncomfortable, try saying, ‘you’ll have to ask them’, or ‘I wouldn’t answer questions they asked about you’.

‘My parents are always whinging to me about each other. I hate it—it makes me so upset. Why can’t they see that I love them both, and don’t want to be involved’

Vickie, aged 15
‘Don’t talk about one parent with the other parent, unless they are friends’

Tom, aged 14

- Even when your parents are not getting along, remember it’s not your job to make things better for them. That’s their responsibility, not yours. They are responsible for you, not the other way around.

- Try not to take sides or judge who is right or wrong. Relationships break down for many reasons.

‘I always blamed my mum because I thought she was the one who made dad leave. It wasn’t until much later that I realised they both made mistakes’

Margaret, aged 18

- Try to understand your parents’ emotions. If they were unhappy while they were together, you may find they might be more settled and relaxed after the separation. Alternatively, your mum or dad may feel sad when they separate. This is also a normal reaction and will usually improve with time.

- Try to arrange to see both parents on your birthday or during holidays, such as Christmas. But remember this may not always be possible.

Even when your parents are not getting along, remember it’s not your job to make things better for them.
**Your brothers or sisters can help you**

Everyone deals with separation differently. Your brothers or sisters might have different thoughts and feelings, and they might live with a different parent to you. Try to talk to and support each other during the process, they could be good comfort and support. They will understand what you are going through and can listen and talk to you about the separation.

- You may have different feelings and opinions about the separation than your siblings and that’s okay. It’s normal to think and feel differently.
- Your brothers or sisters might choose to live with a different parent to you. That’s okay, they have different needs and you can still have a relationship with them even when you don’t live together.
- It’s okay to disagree. Try not to let the differences affect your relationship.

**Extended family can play a role**

Other family members, like your grandparents, uncles and aunties will also have thoughts and feelings about the separation. It’s okay if you do not share their opinions. Remember, everyone deals with these situations differently.

If you feel close to a relative (grandparent, uncle or aunty), try talking to them about how you feel. They can also be good comfort and support during and after separation. It’s also common for kids to live with a grandparent, uncle or aunty after the separation.

You can maintain a relationship with all of your family members, not just the family of the parent you live with. Remind your parents that it is important for you to keep in touch with all of your family.
Step-parents

‘One good thing about your parent’s new partner is how they can teach you stuff. My stepfather is a photographer and he taught me how to use a camera and take good photographs. If I hated him, I would have missed out on that’

Melissa, aged 12

It may be difficult to think about your parents with a new partner. It’s normal to feel a bit uncomfortable about meeting the new partner, and it’s okay to take time to adjust. It’s up to you how you feel about the new person. You can be friends and not be disloyal to your mum/dad. The new partner cannot replace your mother or father.

Step brothers and sisters

If one or both of your parents meet someone else, you might have a step brother or sister. You may have to spend some time with them or live in the same house sometimes. As with step-parents, it may take time to adjust. Remember they might be feeling some of the same things you are. In time, you might become friends. If you are an only child, this could be a chance to experience having a brother or sister for the first time.
A lot of things can change when your parents separate. Some of those changes can be confusing and upsetting. But you need to understand that your parents are separating from each other, not you. Your father will always be your father, and your mother will always be your mother.

Some of the most common changes are listed on the following pages.
WHO LIVES WHERE?

Your parents probably won’t live together anymore and together you’ll need to decide where you live. If your parents can’t make the decision together, the decision may be made by the court (see the What are my rights section on page 10 for more information about this). The decision may be based on practical matters such as which parent is closer to your school, who has more time to help you with day-to-day things like homework and who can provide a stable and comfortable home environment. In some situations, children from separated families are able to spend equal time with both parents and that could mean you’ll divide your time equally between them.

‘When my mum decided to move, I went with her. But that meant I had to leave my dad behind. It’s hard now because I only get to see him during holidays and although we talk on the phone, it’s just not the same’

Shaelene, aged 18

It’s not about who loves you more

Your parents might ask you which parent you would prefer to live with. Remember the choice is not about which parent you love, or which loves you. You and your parents will make a decision considering your needs and who is in the best position to meet those needs. It’s okay if you don’t want to choose. Talk to your parents about the things that are important to you so they have all the information they need to help them with their decision.
TIPS FOR LIVING IN TWO HOUSEHOLDS

- Keep track of the time you’ll be spending at each house in a diary or calendar, or go to the CSA youth website to download your diary, www.youth.csa.gov.au
- Make a list of all the things you need to have at home so you can make sure you have these at both houses.
- Ask your parents if you can get two of the things you need each day like a toothbrush, hairbrush, or even some clothes so you don’t have to carry so much with you each time.
- Ask your parents to make some space in each house where you can keep your gear. If you cannot have a room to yourself, suggest putting up a divider for some privacy.
- If one parent makes you feel guilty when you spend time with the other parent, talk to them about it. You have the right to see both your parents, and your parents might change their behaviour if you let them know how important this is to you.
- Sometimes parents separate because of violence or abuse. Generally, in this type of situation, you are not expected to live in two households, particularly if you don’t feel safe staying alone with a parent who has been violent or abusive. Arrangements can be made for you to have contact with that parent under supervision. To find out more call the Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800, visit www.kidshelp.com.au, call the Family Relationships Advice Line on 1800 050 321, or visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Keep track of the time you’ll be spending at each house in a diary or calendar.
Parents Moving City

One of your parents may move to a different town or city after the separation. This can make it challenging for you to spend time with them. While it’s not your job to arrange time to see both parents, here’s some tips for keeping in touch (you could also use these strategies to keep in touch with friends):

- Make regular times to talk on the phone.
- Write letters.
- Send emails. If you do not already have your own private email address you can set one up through a range of websites including yahoo, hotmail or gmail.
- Send a text message.

Remember it’s not your fault if one parent moves away and it’s okay to tell them how you feel about it.

‘I can remember mum always used to make plans and then not show up. It really hurt and we always felt let down. It was pretty bad’

Emma, aged 18

If you find one of your parents lets you down, you could make a back-up plan. Make an agreement with your other parent, or some friends, to do something fun later that day. You could organise to go out to dinner, or see a movie. It could be anything you enjoy doing.

‘It’s taken me years to get over my dad not wanting to be in my life. Now I know he’s the one missing out on all the things I’ve done. I also know there are people who love me and do want to spend time with me’

Janine, aged 18
WHAT IF MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS WANT TO LIVE SOMEWHERE ELSE?

That’s okay. You have to decide what’s right for you. You can still keep in contact with your brothers and sisters when they live somewhere else if you want to by using the same strategies listed on page 24.

LIVING WITH SOMEONE ELSE

You might decide to live with someone else, like a grandparent, uncle or aunty. Many Australian kids choose to do this. This can be an opportunity for you to strengthen your relationship with this family member. If you choose this option, you can still keep in touch with each of your parents and your brothers and sisters. Have a look at the tips for keeping in touch on the page 24.

CHANGING SCHOOLS

If you have to change schools give yourself some time to settle in. You can keep in touch with your old friends using the tips listed on page 24.

TIPS FOR GETTING USED TO YOUR NEW SCHOOL

- Get involved. Taking part in activities outside the classroom is a good way to make friends. Try out for a school sporting team, or join a club.
- Talk to your teachers if you find your classes or homework difficult.
- Get some help with your homework. If you are finding it difficult to complete your homework, your mum or dad might be able to help you at night, or they could get you a tutor for a period while you adjust.
- Talk to your parents, school counsellor or a teacher if you’re having problems adjusting.
MONEY

Separation and divorce can have a big impact on family finances. For one thing, it is more expensive to run two households than one. It is likely there will be less money, at least for a while. This may mean you have to go without ‘extras’ such as pocket money and/or going out to dinner and the movies.

The stress about money will probably improve with time. However, if you want to help your parents, you can suggest the following resources:

  You might find it helpful for managing your own money too.

- Learn to manage money visit [www.understandingmoney.gov.au](http://www.understandingmoney.gov.au)

- Information about government assistance, visit [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au) or phone 132 490.

A WORD OF ADVICE

It will take time to adjust to the change in lifestyle, and you might find new challenges to face after that, such as your parents continuing to argue. Remember these problems are not your fault—they are part of the separation. Give things time and talk to someone if things get too much. Call Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800, or visit [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)
SOME GENERAL TIPS FOR COPING WITH CHANGE

- Give yourself time to get used to the changes after your parents separate.
- Try to keep as many things in your world as normal as possible—like your own daily and weekly routines.
- Make an effort to keep seeing your friends and family.
- Stay involved in activities you enjoy, like sport or music.
- Try to separate your parents’ problems from your own. Your mum or dad may tell you about some of the stressful things they are trying to sort out. Remember these things are for your parents to worry about—try to focus on the things that you need to do. It’s better if parents talk with other adults about their problems. There are many places that parents can go to for help to manage their problems too.

WHAT IF ONE OF MY PARENTS MEETS SOMEONE ELSE?

This can be confusing and you may feel angry or worried. There are tips on how to deal with your feelings (see the What are you feeling? section on page four). It’s okay to have a friendship with your mum or dad’s new partner if you want to. There is more advice about step-families on page 19, but you can take as long as you need to get to know the new partner. Forming new friendships does not mean you are being disloyal to your other parent. Whether you become close to your parent’s new partner or not, your mum will still be your mum and your dad will still be your dad. Nothing can change that.
The people close to you can help you during and after the separation. A friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, teacher or coach can give advice and support. You may find it difficult to tell your friends about the separation. However, separated families are common. In 2006, there were 49,300 people aged under 18 involved in divorce. If you talk to your friends you might find they have been through a similar thing, and talking about it with a friend can help you feel better.

A WORD OF ADVICE
The most important friendship is the one you have with yourself. Give yourself the love and respect you deserve.

Self respect is a vital part of healthy relationships. Here are 10 tips for respecting yourself:

1. Be happy with who you are.
2. Your actions are different to who you are, you can still like yourself even if you don’t like some of the things you do.
3. Don’t measure yourself against others.
4. Think about the things you want in your life and set goals to achieve them.
5. Talk yourself up. Say nice things to yourself, you don’t have to look outside yourself to feel good. You can feel good by saying and thinking positive things about yourself.
6. If you’re good at something, keep doing it. Develop your talents and share them with others.
7. Keep a journal. Writing down your thoughts can help you to think clearly, and work out what you want.
8. Look after yourself: exercise, eat right, rest and relax.
9. Spend time doing things you enjoy and are good at.
10. Spend time with people who treat you well and make you feel good about yourself.

‘I don’t feel comfortable talking to my friends...’

There are some topics we don’t feel comfortable talking to family or friends about. If there is something like this you want to talk about you can call Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800, or try the online counselling service at kidshelp.com.au. You can remain anonymous.
**Communication** is another key to good relationships. Here are some tips:

- Be clear about what you want to say. You can prepare by writing things down beforehand and ticking them off as you go through them.
- Try to listen to what others are saying.
- Think about your non-verbal communication. Your posture, tone of voice, facial expressions and eye contact all say something about how you are feeling. Make sure your body language reflects what you are saying.
- Face the person you are talking to and sit or stand at the same level so you aren’t looking up or down at them.
- Avoid distracting gestures such as fidgeting with a pen, tapping your feet or fingers.
- Confirm your understanding of the conversation with the person you are talking to.
- If it’s too hard to talk to someone, try writing what you want to say in a letter to that person. You could sit with them while they read it.
WILL I SEPARATE FROM MY PARTNER TOO?

Some teenagers whose parents have separated worry about their own romantic relationships. Just because your parents separated, it does not mean you’ll have problems in your relationships. Remember, the key to good relationships is good communication and respecting yourself and others.

WHO ELSE CAN I TALK TO?

You can talk to a parent, teacher, coach, school counsellor or family friend. A relationship with an adult who you trust and feel safe with can be helpful.
Making New Friends

You might have lots of friends already, or are looking to make new ones. Making friends is not easy for everyone. Everyone feels nervous. Here are some ways to make new friends:

- Join groups that share your common interests. Talking about one of your interests can help give you confidence to talk about other things with potential new friends.
- Practice looking people in the eye when you talk to them.
- Listen to what others are saying, rather than focusing on your own self-consciousness.
- Smile.
- Look for anyone else in the room who seems open to conversation and approach them.
- When you talk to someone new, ask questions about them and the things they like doing.

You can make good friends anywhere. Places to meet new people can include:

- hobbies such as sport, music, art and drama
- being introduced by family members
- part-time jobs
- a new school
- social functions
- a church youth group
LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Make sure you take care of your wellbeing during the separation. This means looking after yourself. Wellbeing can include the thoughts in your head, how your body feels, as well as how you feel at home and at school.

SAFETY

Feeling safe means living free from abuse, bullying and violence. That includes watching someone else, like a friend or family member, suffer from violence or abuse.

Violence or bullying is when one person does something to hurt another or make them afraid. It can be physical, such as hitting, kicking, unwanted touching, any sexual contact you don’t want; or it can be verbal, such as name calling or threats; or it can be stalking.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO FEEL SAFE

You have the right to feel safe all the time. It’s not your fault if people are hurting you. If you don’t feel safe, talk to someone you trust, or contact one of the support services in the back of this booklet.
Violence is against the law. You don’t have to put up with it at home, at school, or in a public place. If you don’t feel safe, talk to someone you trust, like a parent, friend, relative, youth worker, teacher, doctor or school counsellor. You could also call a confidential telephone service like Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800. For more information check out www.bullyingnoway.com.au If you are ever in danger, call the police on 000.

Emotional conflict can also have a big impact on the family, especially emotional conflict between parents. This can include putting each other down, avoiding each other, shaming or insulting each other. Teenagers from separated families are very aware of these things.

‘Mum and dad fought a lot when I was in high school. I used to feel so helpless and confused. I used to have trouble concentrating the next day at school. I never talked to my friends because I didn’t think they’d understand’

Jason, aged 18

If the conflict between your parents is upsetting you, you can talk to someone about it. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to your parents or friends, try using one of the support services listed in the back of this booklet.

Mental Health

There are many feelings about separation that are normal like anger, sadness and confusion. However, if you feel down for a long time you should talk to someone.

If one or more of the following things are true for you, it’s a good idea to talk to someone you trust about it:

- feeling sad or crying often
- hurting yourself
- not wanting to be with your friends or family
- having trouble concentrating
- losing interest in doing things
- trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- feeling left out of the social scene
- low self-esteem
- feeling irritable, angry or hostile
- eating too much or not enough
- feeling sick, such as headaches or stomach aches
- causing trouble at school.
It’s okay to ask for help if you need it. You can talk to your parents, friends, school counsellor, teacher or doctor. They can also help you find other people to talk to, such as experts on dealing with separation. Most communities and schools also have support groups for teenagers whose parents have separated. It can help to talk to people your age who are going through the same thing. Ask your school counsellor about getting involved.

Have a look at the What are you feeling? section on page four for more information on coping with feelings.

TIPS FOR WELLBEING

About one in four young Australians experience a mental health problem each year. It’s important to look out for your mental health and wellbeing.

- Participate in as many of your normal activities as you can, such as school and sporting activities.
- Take care of yourself by eating properly and getting regular exercise.
- Make sure you get enough sleep, about eight or nine hours a day.
- Identify an adult who can be a mentor or role model in your life.
- Do things you are good at and enjoy.
- Think positive thoughts about yourself and your family.
- Remember how important you are to your parents, family and friends.
- Get online and talk to some people through chat rooms or forums.
- Create a blog for yourself. This can help you work through your thoughts and feelings and improve your writing skills. If you do chat online, don’t use your real name or put any personal information in your profile. It’s important to protect yourself from online predators.

If you need more information about mental health and wellbeing, visit:

- www.ybblue.com.au
- www.headspace.org.au
- www.reachout.com.au

3 www.headspace.org.au
School can be a great place to get information and support. Your friends, teachers and school counsellor can all be good support. School might also be one thing that doesn’t change in your life.

**Good Things About School**

School is a good place to keep in touch with your friends. It’s also a great place for advice, information and support. If you want to know how to get in contact with someone to talk to about separation, ask your teacher or school counsellor. School can also help you get involved in other activities like sport or music. These can be a break from problems at home and help you find things you are good at and enjoy.

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**Tips for Studying**

Studying can be tough when your parents are separating. You might find it difficult to concentrate or to find a quiet place to focus on schoolwork.

- Talk to your classmates or teacher to make sure you understand your assignments/homework.
- Use soft lighting when you study—it will help you feel calm and settled.
- Get enough sleep. About nine hours a night will improve your memory and help you feel happy.

- Eat breakfast. Studies show it improves memory and concentration. (Toast and baked beans are good.)

- Study at the same time and the same place each day.

- Give yourself a break. Study for about 50 minutes and then give yourself a 15-minute break before getting back to the books.

- Drink water regularly. It will hydrate your brain and help you concentrate.

- Exercise. Research has found this helps students perform better.

- Talk to your parents about what you need to help you study, such as a quiet place.

If you have to change schools because your parents are separating, have a look at the What happens now? section on page 14 for ideas to help you cope.

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**Balance your job and school**

Part-time jobs can be good for getting extra money, independence, getting out of the house and meeting new people. Some research has shown a positive relationship between part-time work and school achievements. However, it’s also shown that working too much can interfere with school work. Make sure you have the time to commit to part-time work before you take it on. If you already work part-time and are finding it hard to stay on top of things, have a look at the time management tips on page 41 or talk to a parent or teacher about it. Try not to work more than 10 hours a week.

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4 Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, Adolescent psychologist, www.michaelcarr-gregg.com.au
Finding time to do everything you need to do can be hard, especially when things are changing in your life. Good time management will help you to stay on top of things.

- Keep a diary or planner to keep track of what you need to do.
- Make a list of the things you have to do each day, like homework, and the things you want to do each day.
- Prioritise. List each item to be done each day from the most important to the least important. Do the most important ones first.
- Set time limits for each item on your list.
- Don’t put off doing things until later. If you have time to do something now, do it now.
WHERE TO GET HELP

Don’t be afraid to get help before, during or after your parents separate. Below is a quick reference for some key support services.

GENERAL SUPPORT
If you need some general support or advice, try talking to:
- your parents
- a family member
- your friends
- a teacher
- school counsellor
- coach
- a friend’s parents.

PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING
If you need to speak to someone in person or get some online counselling:
- call Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800
- visit www.kidshelp.com.au
- call Lifeline on 131 114
- make an appointment with a psychologist.

INFORMATION ABOUT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND SEPARATION
- Family Relationships Advice Line 1800 050 321, or visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au
- www.chatfirst.com.au
**WELLBEING**
For information about mental health for young people, visit:

- **www.ybblue.com.au**
  (Ybblue is the youth program of *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*. Ybblue encourages young people to talk about depression and get help when they need it)

- **www.headspace.org.au**
  (National Youth Mental Health Foundation)

- **www.goodgrief.org.au**
  (Good Grief includes information for dealing with change, loss and grief)

- **www.reachout.com.au**
  (Reachout provides information and support for young people going through tough times).

**YOUR RIGHTS**
For more information about your rights visit:

- **www.ncylc.org.au**
  (The National Children and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC) website includes Australia’s implementation on the National Convention on the Rights of the Child)

- **www.lawstuff.org.au**
  (this site has information and advice for young people about their legal rights)

- **www.ozchild.com.au**
  (this is a not-for-profit organisation that runs programs to provide opportunities and improve wellbeing of children and young people)

- **www.familycourts.gov.au**
  (this is a site which includes information about family law and separation and divorce).

**SAFETY**
If ever you don’t feel safe:

- Talk to an adult who you trust
- Contact Kids Help Line
- Visit **www.bullyingnoway.com.au** (this site has information about your rights, safety and how to create change if you are being bullied)
- Visit **www.burstingthebubble.com** (this site has information on what you can do if someone in your family is hurting you or another family member).

**IF YOU ARE EVER IN DANGER**

- Call the police on **000**
- Contact your local domestic violence support service listed on page 44.
**VICTORIA**
Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre
Will refer you to a local service that can support you
9am–5pm Mon–Fri
Phone 03 9486 9866

**NEW SOUTH WALES**
Domestic Violence Line
24hr telephone support and referral
Phone 1800 656 463
TTY (Hearing Impaired) 1800 671 442

**ACT**
Domestic Violence Crisis Service
24hr telephone counselling and referral services
Phone 02 6280 0900
TTY 02 6228 1852

**NORTHERN TERRITORY**
Life Line Top End
24 hour general crisis counselling
Phone 131 114

Domestic Violence Crisis Service Darwin
9am–5pm Mon–Fri
Phone 08 8945 6200

**QUEENSLAND**
DV Connect
Phone 1800 811 811

**SOUTH AUSTRALIA**
Domestic Violence Crisis Service
24 hr telephone and face-to-face counselling, referral to safe accommodation
Phone 1300 782 200

**TASMANIA**
Family Violence Counselling and Support Service
4pm–midnight weekends
9am–midnight Mon–Fri
Phone 03 6233 2529

**WESTERN AUSTRALIA**
Crisis Care
24 hr crisis support
Phone 08 9325 1111
or 1800 199 008
TTY 08 9325 1232
DO YOU NEED INTERPRETING HELP?
If you don’t speak English and need help from CSA, ring the Telephone Interpreting Service on 131 450.

OTHER FREE BOOKLETS AVAILABLE IN THIS SERIES

Me and My Kids
Practical ideas for separated parents on developing and maintaining relationships with your kids after separation – particularly for parents who spend much of their time away from their children.

Me and My Money
Addresses the challenges that arise around money issues following separation. Includes hints and tips on stretching your dollar further.

What About Me?
Helping separated parents deal with emotional issues such as anxiety – with suggestions and resources for dealing with them.

Me, My Kids and My Ex
Providing helpful tips and hints on reducing conflict and building a workable relationship with the other parent, for the benefit of the kids.

Me and My Changing Family
Deals with issues that affect separated families when parents re-partner. Includes tips on building healthy relationships after separation.

Dealing with Separation
An interactive CD-ROM where real people in real situations share their experiences, tips and tools about navigating their way through separation.

Order copies at www.csa.gov.au or by calling 1800 040 972.
FAMILY SEPARATION

A GUIDE FOR Teens

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