Managing conflict with your child’s other parent

- Learning how to deal with conflict
- Practical tools to help you avoid arguments or have fewer arguments
Get help with issues around your break-up with an easy-to-use web app tailored to your needs including:

- children and parenting
- relationships and conflict
- health
- housing
- work and benefits
- money
- legal

Over 50 organisations who can help

Find us on many websites including cmoptions.org

Brought to you by Help and Support for Separated Families
Child Maintenance Options

is a free and impartial service that provides information, tools and support to help you make informed choices about child maintenance arrangements. We can:

• help parents set up a child maintenance arrangement between themselves (a ‘family-based’ arrangement) and give them the support to keep it going
• give you information, and help with, other types of child maintenance arrangement
• offer practical information on a range of subjects linked to separation, such as housing, work and money, and put you in touch with organisations who can give you more specialist help and advice.

Get in touch with Child Maintenance Options on 0800 988 0988* or online at cmoptions.org

*See inside back cover for information about call charges
Supporting separating and separated families

Most children, in most circumstances, benefit from having both parents involved in their lives in a positive way, whether they live with them or not. Child maintenance is one way of making this happen, but it’s only part of the story. We have written this guide to help parents build relationships and work together, to make sure their children get as much support as possible – financial and otherwise.

The information in this leaflet is only a guide and does not cover every circumstance. We recommend that you also get independent professional advice which applies to your situation. You can see a list of specialist organisations that may be able to help at the back of this guide. Although we have taken every care in preparing this guide, we cannot guarantee that information is accurate, up-to-date or complete, because it can change over time.

Child Maintenance Options does not endorse the content of any external websites.
About this guide

This guide is for parents who are no longer in a relationship with each other but want to have less conflict between them for the sake of their child or children. It includes lots of practical ideas to help you avoid conflict and work together as parents.

This guide can help you:

• decide how you will work with each other in future
• spot signs of conflict early on so you can deal with it before things get worse
• get outside help to make agreements on things.

How to use this guide

Having separated parents doesn’t harm children – it’s the conflict that often goes with separation that can do the damage. Having less conflict can help everybody involved, and most importantly the children. This guide can help you get started.

You may decide to read all this guide in one go. Or, if you want, you can read one section at a time, and have a break in between.
It’s completely up to you. If you’d rather read one section at a time, then take a look below to help you decide the best place to start.

- **Want to stop the fighting but don’t know where to begin?** Try starting with section 1 on page 10.
- **Want to know about how your conflict started?** Turn to page 12 for help on the causes of conflict.
- **Think you need a referee?** Look at our section on mediation, starting on page 23.

It’s normal for separation to cause conflict, but in most cases it’s possible to work through this so you can both be the parents your child needs. However, if there is a risk of violence or abuse this may not be possible. If these issues affect you, you may want to talk to someone who can give you specialist advice. Child Maintenance Options can help you get in touch with organisations that can do this.
Child Maintenance Options offers a range of practical guides to help parents deal with common separation issues.

How to order our other leaflets

You can order our free leaflets by calling 0800 988 0988*. They can also be downloaded from our website: cmoptions.org
range of practical guides to help on issues.
Introduction – about managing conflict

Why try to deal with conflict?

Sometimes it feels like having less conflict between you and someone else isn’t worth the effort. But there are so many benefits to having less conflict between you and your child’s other parent:

• It’s all about the kids: it’s known that children are happier and better adjusted when there’s no conflict between their parents.
• Less stress: taking the worry out of your life can help you physically and mentally.
• Moving on: sorting problems out can help you draw a line under what’s gone before and start you moving forward again.
• It’s all about the kids (again): it can lead to you having a better relationship with your children. They’re likely to appreciate it if they know you’ve tried to deal with your issues.

Who needs to do it?

Conflict between separated and separating parents is common – but not impossible to fix.

Many people are able to patch up their differences. Often this means both parents can be involved in raising their children, even though they are separated. While it won’t be possible for everyone, it often is possible. It can be realistic to try to sort out your issues, reach new agreements and work together to raise your children. But it won’t happen by itself – you’ll need to think about it, practise it and work at it.

This guide can help.
What causes conflict?

Do you know what causes the conflict between you and your children’s other parent? If so, you may find that fixing the thing that caused your conflict can end the conflict itself.

If you don’t know, it may be worth thinking about. See if you can work out what makes you angry and why. Some of the reasons below may help.

There are six common things that separated parents fight about:

Money
You’ll probably find that your living costs are higher now that you’re not living with the other parent, and that on its own can be stressful. You may also be in the middle of dividing up jointly owned property or bank accounts.

It can be tempting to use money to get revenge for anything you think the other parent has done wrong, whether it means stopping payments or trying to ‘hit them where it hurts’.
Time with the children
The amount of time each parent spends with their children is sometimes used as a bargaining tool, especially during arguments about money. For example, “If you don’t pay me child maintenance I won’t let you see the children” or “I’ll stop paying child maintenance if you don’t change your plans and let me have the children when I want”.

Decision making
Parents who feel they have been treated badly may think that the other parent doesn’t deserve to have a say. Or they might make a decision on their own because they just can’t face talking to the other parent. In other cases, parents may make decisions on purpose that they know the other parent won’t like.

Parenting ‘values’
These are your beliefs about how you should care for your children, and they may be different from those of their other parent. For example, you may believe that it’s important for your children to do well at school, while the other parent may think it’s more important for your children to take part in lots of out-of-school activities.
Parenting style
Your ex might have different ideas about what’s acceptable for the children. For example, they might prefer the children to sit at the dinner table to eat while you don’t mind if they eat while they play or watch TV.

New relationships
You or your ex might have found a new partner, which can be upsetting for the other parent and may take a while for everyone to get used to.

Next steps

• If you’re struggling to let go of the past or cope with the emotional after effects of separation, read our guide *Dealing with your emotions after separation*.

• If you and your ex can’t seem to stop fighting, read the next section ‘Dealing with conflict’.
Dealing with conflict?

It is widely accepted that it’s not separation or divorce itself that causes the greatest amount of harm to children. It’s the level of conflict that they witness between parents during this difficult time.

The thought of having an argument-free discussion with your child’s other parent might seem impossible. Many separated parents say, If I could have a proper conversation with them then we wouldn’t have split up in the first place!

But your child needs you to learn how to handle your differences and deal with any conflict, so that you can work together.

When it comes to conflict, the people who lose out the most are children. And no one wants that to happen. So it’s really important that you both do your best to avoid conflict as much as you can.
Recognising the signs of conflict

Conflict usually starts when either you or the other parent is:

• struggling to deal with feelings about the separation
• unhappy with arrangements to do with your children
• unhappy with the other person’s behaviour or attitude.

Things that you used to be able to compromise on before might have become more of an issue now that you’ve separated.

Conflict can show itself in several ways:

• stopping the other parent’s contact with their children or threatening to take them away
• you or the other parent breaking things, or shouting or acting aggressively
• refusing to speak to each other or not keeping to arrangements
• criticising the other parent in front of the children.
Here are a few examples of how parents criticising one another can actually harm children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You might say:</th>
<th>Your child might feel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“They don’t like sleeping over with you when your new partner is there… isn’t that right?”</td>
<td>Like they are being forced to choose between the two of you and are unable to show their real feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tell Dad that he needs to put some money in the bank account,” or “Tell Mum to pack some more clothes next time you come to stay.”</td>
<td>Worried that their other parent will become angry with them, and feel under pressure because of having to pass on messages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Is that all you did today? That’s not very exciting.”</td>
<td>Let down and bad about the day spent with their other parent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Unless you stick to the agreement I will go back to court.”</td>
<td>Like it’s all their fault and maybe you wouldn’t be fighting if they weren’t around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What would you know about being a responsible parent – you’re a loser!”</td>
<td>Bad about where they come from. If you put down the other parent, they might think you feel the same way about them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The kids told me you let them stay up late – you should have asked me first!”</td>
<td>Afraid of what might happen if they say anything about their other parent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I have nothing, your mother has everything!”</td>
<td>Fearful, angry and worried that if they don’t take sides they will lose the love and affection of the other parent. This could hurt your relationship with your child as well as with the other parent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It can be easy to say something in the heat of the moment that you regret, but try to think carefully about what you say in front of your child. Children can learn from seeing conflict managed in a positive way, just as they can be harmed by conflict which goes unchecked. Often, the things parents end up arguing about the most may hide deeper issues. But if you can uncover what’s really going on it can help you move forwards.

You can find some helpful ideas on the Parent Connection website for working out what these deeper issues might be. Go to [www.theparentingconnection.org.uk](http://www.theparentingconnection.org.uk) and find the tool ‘Hidden issues for separated parents’ in the ‘co-parenting’ section.
Avoiding conflict

Here are some tips to help you to stop disagreements with your child’s other parent turning into outright conflict.

1 Deal with your emotions
Dealing with any hurt, anger, guilt or other emotions you might be feeling is the first step towards your new life and your new relationship with your child’s other parent.

If you’re trying to deal with the end of a relationship, it can be easy to let your emotions get in the way, even if you have the best of intentions. Sometimes they can cause you to act in certain ways without you really understanding why. But if you can’t get past your emotions, you won’t be able to separate the relationship you used to have with your ex-partner from their relationship with your child.

You don’t need to forgive and forget, but your child may need you to accept what happened in the past so that you can both be good parents in the future.

If you’re finding it hard to put your feelings to one side you can find some more information and practical suggestions in our guide *Dealing with your emotions after separation.*
2 Focus on your child
Concentrate on what’s best for your child rather than getting caught up in your ‘rights’ as a parent. For example, think in terms of “the kids will be happier if they see both of us regularly” rather than “I want to see the kids every other week.”

Unless there is a risk of harm, try not to interfere with their other parent’s values or parenting style during their time together. Remember children can enjoy doing different things.

If you’re not happy with something the other parent has done, think about the reasons why you’re not happy. Is it because you think the children will suffer or is it because it makes you feel bad?

3 Look at things from the other parent’s point of view
It can be hard to look at things from the other parent’s point of view, especially if you feel they’ve treated you badly. But considering the other parent’s feelings is an important part of working together.

• If you’re the parent with the main day-to-day care of your child: Try to appreciate that you probably get to spend more time with the children than their other parent does.
• Also, you’ll probably find that you get more financial help. The other parent might find this hard to accept, especially if they’ve had to set up a home from scratch.
• If you’re the parent who lives apart from your child: Try to appreciate that the other parent probably has to do more of the daily work involved in caring for your child.

4 Be clear about what you’ve agreed
Misunderstandings almost always lead to conflict, so make sure the other parent is clear about what needs to happen, and check that you understand what you need to do.
5 Be prepared to compromise

Compromise involves a little bit of give and take on both sides. If you can both learn to do this, you’re more likely to make arrangements that will work for your family.

Compromise doesn’t always mean meeting each other halfway on every issue. Sometimes parents find it easier to agree one thing to suit one person, and another to suit the other person, and so on. This can feel better because it means you each make compromises but also get some of the decisions you want.

6 Be realistic

• Accept the other parent for who they are. Most parents have good intentions at heart, even if it doesn’t seem that way. But like all of us, they sometimes make mistakes.
• Accept that both you and the other parent are going to have to make changes.

• Remember that there are no quick fixes or miracles. You can do all the right things and still not see immediate results. But keep trying, for your child’s sake.

7 Admit when you’re wrong

It’s hard to do, but the other parent is likely to have more respect for you if you’re prepared to admit when you’re wrong.
If you can’t avoid conflict

- Do still try to avoid arguing in front of your children at all costs.
- If you do have an argument, try to end it as soon as possible – don’t let it go on and on, because it may get worse.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help. In the short term, friends or relatives could help you avoid contact with your ex. For example, they can pass on messages and pick up or drop off your child at the beginning or end of visits with their other parent.

Next steps

- Need some help with making agreements with the other parent? The next section on mediation can give you some ideas.
- Money worries causing conflict? Take a look at our guide *Talking about money* for some ideas about how you can sort things out.
What is mediation?

‘Mediation’ is when separated or separating couples meet with someone who’s been trained to help them come to practical decisions: about money, child maintenance, property, or all these issues.

To put it another way, it’s a chance for you to sit down and talk to your child’s other parent with a neutral professional. Mediation can help parents who have been separated for a long time or have never lived together.

Following a change to the law in 2011, if you are going through a legal separation you are expected to try to sort things out through mediation before you make an application to a court. There are exceptions to this and the rules can be complicated. If this applies to your situation we recommend that you get expert advice.

For most people, successful mediation is all about taking a small step towards improving a tough situation. At first, it may simply mean better communication between two parents at a very stressful and emotionally difficult time.

Secondly, if mediation leads to there being less conflict between you both, it’s then much easier to sort out the big issues that result from separation, divorce or getting a new partner. This is important for lessening the impact that changes like these have on the children.
How mediation can help you

• It’s a way to help you make decisions before or after you’ve separated or divorced.
• It can be cheaper than going to court and can lead to positive results.
• It can help you both work together to decide what’s best for your child.
• It’s a positive way to reduce conflict.
• It can provide a flexible, lasting agreement on issues such as child maintenance.
• It’s confidential.

The cost of mediation

It can be difficult to work out how much mediation might cost. If you qualify for legal aid, it could be free. But if you’re paying for it yourself, the charges are different for different mediators. The costs of mediation can vary between England, Wales and Scotland too.

Don’t be afraid to ask for prices before agreeing to any mediation sessions. And remember that no matter how much it costs, mediation will often be cheaper than going to court.
Finally

Working to reduce conflict in a relationship is never easy, and it’s rarely done quickly. It’s a long, hard road. But you’re clearly determined to work at it and in most cases there’s no reason why you can’t achieve your goals.

When the going gets tough, just remember the reasons why you want to remove the conflict from your relationship with your child’s other parent: it’s good for you and, perhaps more importantly, it’s good for your children.

If you need more advice or information some of the organisations listed on the following pages may be able to help.
Useful contacts

Parenting and parenting apart

Centre for Separated Families
www.separatedfamilies.info
advice@separatedfamilies.org.uk
Provides advice and support to parents and other people experiencing family separation.

Family Lives
(England and Wales)
www.familylives.org.uk
Family Lives helpline:
0808 800 2222
Monday to Sunday
24 hours a day
Help for parents, families and step families dealing with stressful situations. Runs a helpline, live chat and other services.

Families need Fathers
(England and Wales)
www.fnf.org.uk
(Scotland)
www.fnfscotland.org.uk
Helpline: 0300 0300 363
Every day 7am to midnight
(England and Wales),
Monday to Friday
6pm to 10pm (Scotland)
Help with issues caused by relationship breakdown and parenting apart. Help to involve both parents in a child’s life after separation. Services include a national helpline and local branch meetings across the UK.

Gingerbread
(England and Wales)
www.gingerbread.org.uk
Lone Parent Helpline:
0808 802 0925
Monday 10am to 6pm
Tuesday, Thursday and Friday
10am to 4pm
Wednesday 10am to 1pm
and 5pm to 7pm
Information for single parents about a wide range of legal, financial and parenting matters.
Managing conflict with your child’s other parent
a supporting separated families guide

ParentLine Scotland
www.children1st.org.uk
0800 028 2233
Monday to Friday
9am to 10pm
Saturday and Sunday
12noon to 8pm
Free confidential support for parents and carers in Scotland who need help with family or relationship issues.

The Parent Connection from One Plus One
www.theparentconnection.org.uk
A website for parents who are separating or are separated. It provides a wide range of tools and information adapted from face-to-face mediation techniques that parents can use for themselves.
Money and work

Child Maintenance Options
cmoptions.org
0800 988 0988
Text ‘OPTIONS’ to 66644
Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm, Saturday 9am to 4pm
Free, impartial information and guidance to help separated parents make informed decisions about supporting their children.

MATCH
www.matchmothers.org
Non-judgemental support and information for mothers apart from their children in a wide variety of circumstances.

HM Revenue & Customs
www.hmrc.gov.uk
Tax Credit helpline:
0345 300 3900
Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm, Saturday 8am to 4pm
Child Benefit helpline:
0845 302 1444*
Textphone: 0345 300 3909
Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm, Saturday 8am to 4pm
Information about Child Benefit and Tax Credits.
Jobcentre Plus
www.gov.uk
Benefits helpline: 0800 055 6688
Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm

Jobsearch helpline: 08456 060 234
Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm, Saturday 9am to 1pm
Government service that gives jobseekers information and services including benefit claims, loans and grants and help with finding a job.

Money Advice Service
www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk
Money Advice Line: 0300 500 5000
Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm
Information and advice on all types of financial matters, including about parenting, separation and divorce. Can arrange face-to-face sessions to help parents put budgets together.

National Debtline
www.nationaldebtline.co.uk
0808 808 4000
Monday to Friday 9am to 9pm, Saturday 9.30am to 1pm
Free and confidential helpline for advice about dealing with debt.
General advice and support

Citizens Advice (England and Wales)
www.adviceguide.org.uk
Advice line England: 0844 411 1444
Advice line Wales: 0844 477 2020
A popular source of free, independent and confidential advice about legal, money and other problems. Can put you in touch with a local Citizens Advice Bureau.

Scottish Citizens Advice Bureau
www.cas.org.uk
Citizens Advice Direct: Call 0808 800 9060
Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm and Saturday 10am to 2pm
Free, independent and confidential advice through its network of bureaux in Scotland.

Gov.UK
www.gov.uk
Government website providing information about parenting, money, benefits and work, and access to online government services.
Legal advice and mediation

Community Legal Advice (England and Wales)
www.gov.uk
Helpline: 0845 345 4 345
Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9am to 12.30pm
A free, confidential and independent legal advice service.

Family Law Association (Scotland)
www.familylawassociation.org
An online information and advice centre explaining family law in Scotland.

National Family Mediation (England and Wales)
www.nfm.org.uk
0300 4000 636
Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm
A network of family mediation services that helps couples who are going through separation or divorce, or living apart, to sort out issues affecting both of them.

You can also download Parenting Plans from nfm.org.uk It’s a free guide that can be a useful source of information for parents dealing with divorce or separation.
Relate (England and Wales)
www.relate.org.uk
0300 100 1234
Relationship counselling for individuals and couples, and counselling for children and young people.

Resolution (England and Wales)
www.resolution.org.uk
01689 820 272
9am to 5.30pm
National organisation of family lawyers that helps families reach solutions to problems in a non-confrontational way. Can provide information about all aspects of family law.

Scottish Legal Aid Board
www.slab.org.uk
Legal aid helpline:
0845 122 8686
Open 7 days a week
7am to 11pm
The organisation responsible for managing legal aid in Scotland, providing funding for people who qualify for it.

Relate has a sister website that provides online advice and support for parents and families: www.relateforparents.org.uk

Relationships Scotland
www.relationshipsscotland.org.uk
Relationship and family support across Scotland, including mediation services and child contact centres.
Dealing with domestic violence

Mankind
www.mankind.org.uk
Helpline: 01823 334 244
Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm and 7pm to 9pm
Support for male victims of domestic abuse and violence. Provides information, support and access to local police, counselling, housing and other services.

National Domestic Violence Helpline
www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk
Helpline: 0808 2000 247
Open 7 days a week, 24 hours a day
Free helpline available around the clock to give emotional support and practical advice to victims of domestic violence and abuse.
**Emotional wellbeing**

**NHS Choices**
www.nhs.uk (England)  
www.nhs24.com (Scotland)  
www.wales.nhs.uk (Wales)  
Information from the National Health Service on conditions, treatments, local services and healthy living.

**Samaritans**
www.samaritans.org  
Helpline: 08457 909 090  
Open 7 days a week,  
24 hours a day  
Free, confidential emotional support for people experiencing stress, anxiety, despair or similar feelings.

**Young Minds Parents Helpline**
www.youngminds.org.uk  
0808 802 5544  
Monday to Friday  
9.30am to 4pm  
parents@youngminds.org.uk  
Confidential support for anyone worried about the emotional problems or behaviour of a child or young person.
The statistics quoted in this guide are based on the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey, the 2008 ONS population projections, the 2007 Families with Children Study and up-to-date Child Support Agency administrative data.

*Call charges

Calls to 0800 numbers are free from BT land lines but you may have to pay if you use another phone company or a mobile phone, or if you are calling from abroad.

Calls to 0845 numbers from BT land lines should cost no more than 4p a minute with a 15p call set-up charge. You may have to pay more if you use another phone company or a mobile phone, or if you are calling from abroad.

Calls from mobile phones can cost up to 40p a minute, so check the cost of calls with your service provider.

The main sources of research used to write this guide are:


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