

Parenting together after separation

➤ a supporting separated families guide



- Building a working parenting relationship with your ex

- Practical tools to help you parent together successfully

 Child
Maintenance
options

Sorting out separation

Web app

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

Expert help at the click of a button

Find us on many websites including cmoptions.org



Brought to you by
Help and Support
for Separated Families

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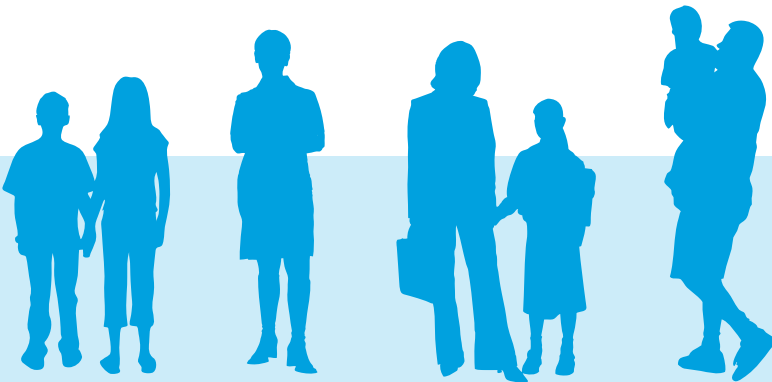
Child Maintenance Options

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 about, 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

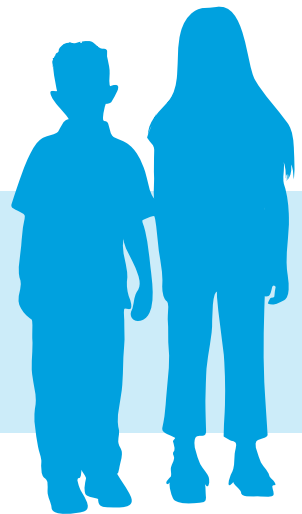


Supporting separating and separated families

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 work together for the sake of their child or children. It includes lots of practical ideas to help you avoid conflict and 'co-parent' together.

This guide can help you:

- understand that it's normal to find co-parenting challenging – especially in the early days after separation
- 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.



How to use this guide

Co-parenting means both parents are involved in caring for, and making decisions about, their children. The information and support in this guide can help you work together with your child's other parent, even though you're no longer in a relationship with them.

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.

- **Worried about old arguments starting up again?**

Turn to page 22 for what to do if the other parent won't co-operate

- **Ready to work together with the other parent?**

You'll find information and ideas to help you move forward starting on page 21

- **Worried about living apart from your child?**

Look at our 'parenting from a distance' tips on page 26.

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.




For what to do if the other parent won't co-operate see our guide ***Managing conflict with your child's other parent.***

Child Maintenance Options offers a parents deal with common separation

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**



Information for parents with the day-to-day care of their child

- a child maintenance decisions guide



- Understand your child maintenance choices
- Tools to help you set up a child maintenance arrangement



Talking about money

- a child maintenance decisions guide



- Take control of your finances
- Think about the types of financial support your child might need
- Tips for talking about money with your child's other parent



Helping someone you know



- a child maintenance decisions guide

- Help parents make decisions about child maintenance arrangements
- Understand the role you can play
- Know about the help available for parents





Family-based arrangement form

- a child maintenance decisions guide



Child maintenance and staying safe


- a child maintenance decisions guide



Information for parents living apart from their child

- a child maintenance decisions guide

- Understand your child maintenance choices
- Tools to help you set up a child maintenance arrangement



range of practical guides to help on issues.

Practical support for separating parents

• a supporting separated families guide



- Help with making arrangements with your child's other parent
- Information about your housing and employment rights
- Where to find more help and support

Child Maintenance options

Managing conflict with your child's other parent

• a supporting separated families guide




- Learning how to deal with conflict
- Practical tools to help you avoid arguments or less tense arguments

Child Maintenance options

Getting in contact with your child's other parent

• a supporting separated families guide



- Understand common fears and concerns
- Tips to help you find someone and get in touch
- When and how the statutory child maintenance services can help

Child Maintenance options


Dealing with your emotions after separation

• a supporting separated families guide




- Understand where you are on your emotional journey
- Tools and tips to help you move on
- Help children deal with their feelings
- When and how to get professional help

Child Maintenance options



How to complain about Child Maintenance Options

Child Maintenance options



How Child Maintenance Options uses your personal information

Child Maintenance options

The business of co-parenting

What is co-parenting

Co-parenting is when both parents:

- share the responsibility of caring for and making decisions about their children, and
- play a positive part in their children's lives

co-parents support each other as parents, and focus on the needs of their children. They accept that both parents have a part to play when it comes to raising their children, even though they don't live together anymore.

Challenges with co-parenting

You might not think you can do it

Separating from a partner can be one of the most upsetting things that people go through. There might be so much bad feeling between the two of you that the idea of working together to raise your children seems impossible. And when you're feeling low it can be hard to imagine that things can change for the better.

The information in this guide should help you to believe you can create a parenting partnership, despite what may have happened in the past.

You might not want to

Co-parenting may not seem like an attractive choice right now, especially if you're thinking any of the following.

- “I want to start a new life and it will be easier without my ex around.”
- “After the way they've behaved they don't deserve to be a parent.”
- “I'm protecting my child from being let down the way I've been.”
- “I want them to realise what they've done and pay the price for it.”
- “I don't need their help, I can manage without them!”
- “I don't want their new partner interfering.”



If you've found yourself saying or thinking any of these things, try to remember that separation is not just about you and your ex. Putting your child first may mean dealing with some of these uncomfortable feelings.

The experiences you have had with your partner may have left you feeling angry, lacking in trust or let down. But try not to convince yourself that your child feels this way – try to be clear about what your child really is feeling.

For some separated parents, it's the fear of upsetting their children that stops them from playing a part in their lives.

However, unless co-parenting involves a real risk of violence or abuse to you or your child, they really do need you both to be part of their lives.

Why it's worth it

Your child will usually cope with a separation better if both you and their other parent remain actively and positively involved in their lives, because they'll feel more secure about their relationship with you both.

Research also shows that when children have a positive relationship with both parents, they are more likely to:

- do better at school
- stay out of trouble
- have higher levels of self-esteem
- go on to have healthier relationships as an adult.

What's more, children in separated families are usually much better off if their parents can manage conflict themselves in a positive way. Ongoing conflict is actually much worse for them than a change to their family set up – you can read more about this on page 18.

Co-parenting could have a plus-side for you too. There could be fewer arguments, and less stress or work for one parent to take on alone. There's also less chance of either parent missing out on things that are important to your child.

You might also find that if you can make decisions about co-parenting now, it could help you feel able to move on.

If you're working together, you won't need anyone else (for example the courts or the Child Maintenance Service) to be involved in your decisions – leaving you both free to make the arrangements that suit you and your child.

And at least you'll know you're trying to do the right thing, and your child will be able to see this too.

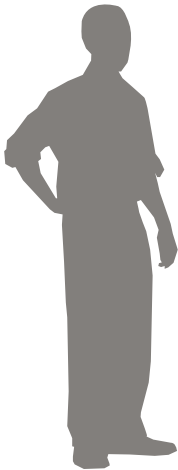
Still not convinced? Try to think of things from your child's point of view. To them, you and the other parent will always be mum and dad. And that will never change, even if you aren't in a relationship with each other any more.

Next steps

- **If you're ready to start working together with your ex,** there's more information about talking to each other on page 21.
- **If you're worried about how to parent from a distance,** have a look at the tips on page 26.



If you're struggling to deal with your feelings about the end of a relationship, you might find it helpful to read our guide ***Dealing with emotions after separation.***



Your new parenting situation

Rethinking your role

If you've recently separated from your partner, you'll probably now find yourself in one of these situations:

- left at home, with or without your child
- living outside the home you used to share with your partner, with or without your child
- in the middle of trying to make one of these arrangements.

As a result, your role as a parent is likely to change too.

For example, you may find yourself responsible for things that you never had to worry about before, like taking charge of the family finances or taking the children clothes shopping.

Or, if your child now lives with their other parent for most of the time, you may not spend as much time with them as you're used to, or be as heavily involved in the day-to-day decision making.

It takes time to adjust when things change, and it can sometimes be hard to imagine a new way of doing things.

Often, people in this position struggle to look ahead and can't see how things will ever work out. But many find that, in time, they become used to their new roles. They sometimes even find there are positives – such as the chance to spend more time with the children, learn new skills, or put an end to constant arguments.

And remember, even if your role changes, you'll always be 'mum' or 'dad' to your children.



There are some questions you can ask yourself on the Parent Connection website that might help you get a clearer picture of the future – go to **www.theparentconnection.org.uk** and find the exercise ‘Visualising the future’ in the co-parenting section.



Looking after yourself

As a separated parent, you might feel like you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders. But, if you take the time you need to look after yourself, you should have more energy to deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

Here are some suggestions to help you on your way. They may not solve all your problems, but they could help you to feel more positive about things.

1 Find some 'me time'.

Put simply, you deserve some time to yourself!

2 Be kind to your body.

Even a little bit of exercise will make you feel better. But smoking, drinking too much and not eating properly will all add to your stress levels.

3 Reach out to friends.

They can be a shoulder to cry on and can cheer you up when you're feeling down. You might need to ask for help. Often people think they're doing the right thing by staying away – they might think you need space, or not want to look like they're interfering.

4 Ask your family to help.

They can offer emotional and practical support, giving you (and your child) a sense of stability and consistency.

5 Have some fun.

A hobby can help take your mind off your worries. And by finding new hobbies, you'll be taking a step towards a new life without your ex partner. So, think about what you enjoy doing, then get out there and do it. Or try something completely new – you may surprise yourself, and this can make you feel more in control.

6 Tackle your finances.

Money worries can make you stressed, and may cause arguments with your ex. So it could be a really good idea to take a deep breath and make some decisions about exactly what needs to happen. This can be a complicated subject so get specialist help if you need to.

7 Go easy on yourself.

Over time you'll get used to new ways of organising family life, you don't have to do it all at once.

Next steps

If you need help coping with your feelings, you might find it helpful to read our guide ***Dealing with emotions after separation***.

If you don't know where to start with your finances, you may find it helpful to try some of the budgeting ideas in our guide ***Talking about money***. You can also find interactive budgeting tools on the Child Maintenance Options website **[cmoptions.org](https://www.cmoptions.org)**

Helping children with separation

It's important to help children deal with the separation as much as possible. This has a major effect on how well they cope with the change, their sense of security and well-being, and their relationship with their other parent.

The following tips should help.

Remember you're the adult

Do your best to keep your anger, hurt and other feelings about the separation away from your child. You don't want them to carry the burden for you.

Tell them what's happening

If you say nothing, your child may start to feel confused, anxious or insecure. They may also have their own ideas about the reasons for the separation. If you don't reassure them and give them sensible information, your child may believe they are to blame for the break-up, or the conflict between you and your ex-partner.

Think about your child's age when you're deciding what to say. Research shows that children from separated families often wish they had been told more, and that older children often want to be consulted on decisions that affect them too.

Even older children don't need to know everything. It's still better not to discuss money and other issues in front of them, and it's important to remain positive when you talk about their other parent.

Offer reassurance

Tell your children regularly that both their parents love them, and that they are not to blame for the separation.

Keep things normal, especially in the early days

In the early days after separation, it's vital to keep things as normal and stable as possible. For example, keep bedtimes the same as they've always been. If you arrange to see your child every Saturday, try to stick to that time. And if they usually go to their gran's every month, don't suddenly change this. You can always be more flexible once things have become settled.

Don't use children to pass on a message

Research shows that this is one of the hardest things for children to deal with. Becoming the 'go-between' for their parents can leave them feeling very torn, and they end up taking on a lot of the emotional burden of the separation. And if you only communicate through your child, it could make things harder in the long run, because you won't ever find more positive ways of communicating.



Your child and their other parent

Whatever has happened between you and your child's other parent, your child still needs to be able to have a relationship with them – unless this puts them at risk of harm.

They may not have made a good partner for you, or you may be having problems in your relationship with each other, but in most cases children are still better off if they have a good relationship with both parents.

If you're finding it difficult to see how the other parent can play a positive role in your child's life, here's an exercise that might help you.

Think about what you and the other parent do with your child and write down the different skills you each have.

I...

- take the kids to swimming lessons
- help them with their homework
- distract them when they start fighting

They...

- remember the names of their friends
- do lots of craft activities with them
- read them a bedtime story

Next steps

If you feel ready to build a working relationship, great!

Go straight to 'co-parenting in practice' on page 24 for practical ideas on how to get started.



Struggling to talk without arguing? Have a look at our guide ***Managing conflict with your child's other parent.***

Working with your ex-partner

If you're going to co-parent, you'll need to learn to work together. This is not about getting together, or back together, with your child's other parent. It's about supporting each other to raise them now.

And it doesn't matter if you don't like each other much. The fact is many people work with people they don't like – for example with difficult colleagues. One of your child's teachers might not be your cup of tea, but you probably work together with them.

How you can start to work together

The first thing you can do is make the decision to put the past behind you. Make up your mind to start from today.

Think about these three principles, which will be vital for working together well.

1 Respect each other.

Accept that they are the other parent of your child, and that they will always have a part to play in your child's life.

Try to remember that you're trying to build a new co-parenting relationship, not settle old scores.

2 Think about each other's feelings.

Try to see things from their point of view. Be polite and treat them like you want to be treated.

3 Talk to each other.

Listen to what they are saying and be clear about what you mean when you're talking to them. Try not to use phrases that sound like an accusation, like 'you never...' or 'you always...' If you're struggling to talk face to face, try explaining yourself in an email or a letter. But resist texting if you can – it might seem like an easier option, but texts are very easy to misunderstand.

If the other parent won't co-operate

Even if your child's other parent doesn't want to co-parent, it doesn't mean you should give up. A lot of the information in this guide is about your own actions, and you still have control over these.

For example, you can still share information about your child and help your child keep in contact with the other parent. You can also keep calm if they try to start an argument.

We're under no illusions – these things can be easier said than done. But at least you'll know that you are doing the right thing for your child. And hopefully, with you leading by example, their other parent will soon come around to the idea of co-parenting.

Next steps

If you want more practical tips about working together there's more information and support on page 21.



Co-parenting in practice

Sharing information

Most co-parents find they have to work harder to make sure important information about their children is shared with the other parent.

In the past, you probably shared information without even thinking about it – for example, over the breakfast table, or in the car on the way to the supermarket. But now that you're parenting apart, you'll need to take extra care to make sure you both know what's happening with your child.

The types of information you need to share might include:

- health issues – for example, if your child has started taking any medication or been to the dentist
- unusual behaviour – especially reactions to the separation
- school attendance and performance, and special events such as parent evenings, plays, sports days
- information about members of the wider family
- decisions that your child has made for themselves – they may feel anxious about telling the other parent themselves
- decisions you have made for your child – for example changes to bedtimes
- your child's achievements – co-parenting is about sharing the good times too.

Sharing information isn't about scoring points or making the other parent feel guilty. If your child is having a hard time with something or needs extra support, think about how you can both help them rather than blame each other.



If you have what the law calls ‘parental responsibility’ you can ask the school to send you this type of information directly, if you want. You can find out more about parental responsibility in our leaflet ***Practical support for separating parents.***

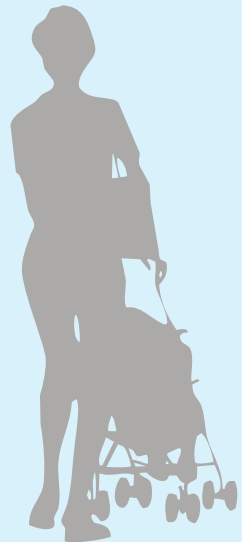
Parenting plans

Lots of co-parents find it useful to make a ‘parenting plan’, or ‘parenting agreement’. This sets out the ‘who does what and when’ of raising children together. It could be a good way to put the ideas in this guide into practice.

Even if you decide not to make a parenting plan, you could still use a blank one to think through all the information you need to share and the decisions you need to make together.



To download a step-by-step guide, go to the National Family Mediation website **www.nfm.org.uk**



Parenting from a distance

If you live a long distance away from your child, you might not get to spend as much time with them as you would like. But there are lots of ways to stay involved in their life. Here are just a couple of ideas to get you started.

- 1 Make an extra effort to take an interest in the same things as them. For example:
 - follow their favourite football team or pop group
 - watch some of the same TV shows or films
 - read the same book as them.
- 2 Talk to them over the phone or by web-cam if you have one. You could use this time to plan your next visit together, or even read them a bedtime story.
- 3 Send emails, letters and texts, and ask them to send you their drawings or latest schoolwork. Try not to criticise your child if they don't always reply – their lives are probably just as busy as yours.
- 4 Make the most of the time you do spend together:
 - teach them important skills like swimming, riding a bike, or even tying their shoelaces
 - work on projects together – for example, make a family tree or get them to help you with some simple DIY.

Try not to change plans or cancel arrangements at the last minute. Not only could it upset or disappoint your child, but it may also cause conflict with their other parent.

If you do most of the parenting, you can help by:

- encouraging your child to send drawings or letters through the post
- making sure your child is at home when they are expecting a phone call from their other parent
- preparing your child for when they have visits with their other parent
- being positive about the other parent in front of your child, and supporting their relationship with them.



New partners

Starting a relationship with a new partner may upset your relationship with your child's other parent. If this applies to you or your ex – or if it could apply to either of you in future – then it's something to watch out for, as it may well affect your existing child maintenance arrangements.



The parenting advice website Family Lives has a leaflet, ***Successful stepfamilies***, which can give you more tips on bringing stepchildren up together.

If your or your ex's new family becomes a cause of conflict then you may find our guide ***Managing conflict with your child's other parent*** useful.

Final note

You're clearly determined to put your old relationship behind you and work towards a new co-parenting relationship.

As you start to put these ideas into practice, remember that co-parenting is a skill. And like any new skill, it takes time and practice to get it right.

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

www.fnf.org.uk

(England and Wales)

www.fnfscotland.org.uk

(Scotland)

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.

ParentLine Scotland

www.children1st.org.uk

0800 028 2233

Monday, Wednesday and
Friday 9am to 5pm

Tuesday and Thursday
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

Textphone: 0800 023 4888

Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm

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

Textphone: 18001 0300 500 5000

Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm,

Saturday 9am to 1pm,

excluding Bank Holidays

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,

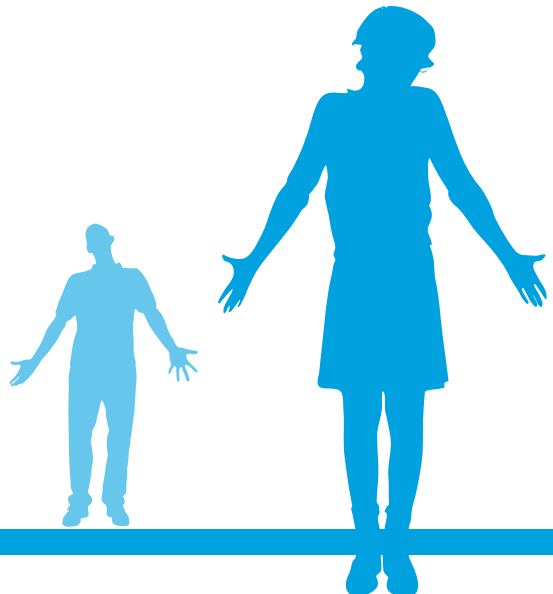
Saturday 9.30am to 1pm

24 Hour Voicemail

Free and confidential helpline for advice about dealing with debt.



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.



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.

Relate (England and Wales)

www.relate.org.uk

0300 100 1234

Relationship counselling for individuals and couples, and counselling for children and young people.



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.

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.

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 2009 Labour Force Survey.



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

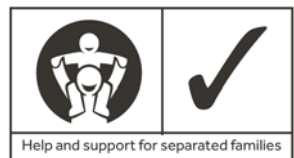
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***Call charges**

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.



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