



HELP CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR PARENTS SEPARATION

A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS & YOUTH WORKERS

Research has shown that children are significantly affected by their parents' separation, it impacts their mental well being, academic performance and future relationships. It affects children of all ages, including teenagers and adult children and can create issues even years later as well as during the separation.

Family breakdown
is the

BIGGEST

factor impacting
teenage mental health¹



1.4M UK children have seen
their parents split in
the last 5 years

Teachers and youth workers are in a unique position to help and support when a young person's parents separate. In this guide, we have listed some of the practical things you can do to help.

For more information and details of courses we run for teenagers and young adults visit yourdirection.info and follow us on Instagram @yourdirectionuk.

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The best thing was being able to share difficult situations and past experiences in a safe space with people who are willing to listen and not judge.”

Young person who attended Your Direction

Sources:

1.2 Nov 2017 - Marriage Foundation: Family breakdown and teenage mental health

2.14 July 2023 - Marriage Foundation: Source of family breakdown

3. "What about me?" Reframing Support for Families following Parental Separation - Report of the Family Solutions Group

WHERE TO START

Understanding a young person's situation is the most important place to begin. Few people talk about separation from the child's perspective, in most situations their voice is not heard. The first step in offering them effective support is understanding what it's like for them.

WHAT'S IT LIKE WHEN YOUR PARENTS SPLIT UP?

- Although separation is common, your parents' separation is a unique loss for you. It's a radical re-ordering of your foundations that will affect the rest of your life.
- It affects every part of your life, how you feel and how you live. It can completely preoccupy your mind.
- It's often difficult to express how you feel. You just want to be "normal" so dealing with these changes is really challenging.
- It can really damage your relationships with your parents, which can cause mental health problems, attachment issues, isolation, and difficulty regulating emotions.
- You can often feel that you can't turn to your parents for support because dealing with the separation themselves takes all their focus and they can be defensive when you talk about it.
- When one parent leaves home, you may have to take on more responsibilities which feels like a burden and may make you feel anxious.
- You can be caught in the middle of arguments, either trying to help or as an innocent bystander.
- You might question if you are like them and if that means your future relationships might end the same way.
- Separation costs a lot, can take years to resolve and brings substantial uncertainty to what you can have or do.
- You might suddenly have step-parents and step-siblings which complicates family life. It quickly changes your relationship with your parents and your place in the family. It's a lot to understand and accept.

Even when parents manage a separation well many of the issues remain. Children of separated parents feel different to their peers and aren't routinely given opportunities to talk and process everything that's happened. Children of separated parents have to learn emotional and relationship skills at an earlier stage often in pressured situations.

Teachers and youth leaders have a crucial role as independent third parties who can support young people to thrive despite these life-changing events. We can empower them to make positive choices and give them skills and tools that will help. This can have huge and long-lasting benefits transforming lives and futures.

10 THINGS TEACHERS & YOUTH WORKERS CAN DO

1. Be informed - get to know a child's situation and any important details that might impact them emotionally. BUT keep it confidential to ensure they feel comfortable speaking to you and don't feel singled out. Only share information with colleagues so you can ensure they receive consistent support and minimise any awkwardness for the child

2. Be patient and flexible - children may have swings in emotions or academic performance, so be understanding as they adjust to the changes.

3. Be available - let them know that they can talk to you and that you are there to listen and support them. Time is a precious commodity and children often start speaking up at inconvenient times but being available and open to them is the best starting point.

4. Listen without preconceived ideas. Children may have a very different perspective to their parents or others. Asking open questions will show interest and help children express thoughts and feelings.

5. Encourage them to process the sometimes overwhelming feelings in healthy ways by trying journaling, art, exercise, sport or finding someone to talk to regularly.

6. Teach what creates a safe space and how to use "boundaries" to help children deal with the difficult emotional situations they face. Knowing how to feel physically and emotionally safe in difficult situations is an important skill.

7. Encourage them to talk to their parents. Family separation makes good communication hard. Teach skills to use when talking gets difficult, such as sticking to the facts of one issue rather than getting sidetracked by multiple issues or heavy emotions.

8. Be mindful of potential triggers relating to family topics in activities. Adjust the tasks if necessary, and be ready to provide extra support if the child seems upset or withdrawn.

9. Help parents. Children fare better when parents adapt so they still parent with their ex. Encourage parents to get support to deal with their own emotions like Restored Lives and to adapt their parenting by attending parenting courses. This will help the whole family.

10. Get extra help. Signpost available resources and raise awareness with your colleagues. Collaborate with your pastoral care team to provide additional help. Encourage children to accept more help through 1-2-1 counselling or joining Your Direction.

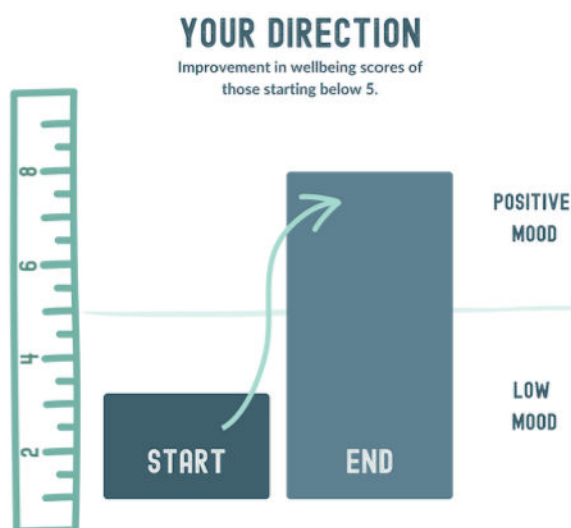
YOUR DIRECTION

The impact on children when a family separates is substantial, even if they are adult children, so it's great for them to get external help from experts.

Our course, Your Direction has been created specifically to support teenagers and young adults whose parents separate. During five sessions, we bring groups of 12-18 year olds and 18-30 year olds together giving them a safe space to talk with their peers. We explore the key challenges and discuss skills that help.

We track the efficacy of our courses by asking guests to rate their well being at the start and the end. The average score for all our guests at the start was 5.1 and this average increased to 8.1 at the end.

Importantly, those who started with a low well being score below 5, averaged 3.3, improved their score to an average of 8.0 at the end.



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I feel empowered to live my own life and feel that my parent's divorce is an event and not a defining feature of my life. I also feel equipped to set boundaries and express my feelings comfortably.

Your Direction Participant

Developed jointly by Restored Lives and children's charity Spurgeons, Your Direction combines lived experience with expertise from professional counsellors and specialists. The course is stuffed with practical tips and lively discussions that help young people navigate their parents' breakup and move forward successfully with their own lives.

Find out more yourdirection.info, follow us on Instagram @yourdirectionuk and encourage children to join our next course.

Spurgeons

Restored Lives