
Family break ups - tips for children

Summary

- It takes time and effort to adjust to family breakups.
 - Family breakups can cause a range of feelings, from anger to relief.
 - Talking to your parents or someone else outside the family can help you to make sense of a family breakup.
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When a family breaks up, it is difficult for everyone involved. Sometimes, family break ups happen after long periods of fighting and unhappiness. At other times they happen suddenly and it is hard to understand why. Family relationships change as a result of the split and there is often a lot of adjusting to do.

Family break ups affect people differently

Everyone affected by the family break up will have their own feelings about the situation. You may feel:

- upset
- angry
- relieved
- helpless
- afraid
- resentful
- a sense of loss or grief.

The family split may be even harder for you if you have to move house as a result. This is especially true if you have to move from your area and change schools – and if you are worried about losing touch with your friends.

You might find that your parents are fighting, or that there are more fights between you and your siblings. You might feel the need for time and affection from both your parents, or the need for more independence from them. It's different for everyone.

If you are struggling to cope and feeling really down, you could be experiencing anxiety or **depression**. Talk to someone you know and trust about how you are feeling – such as a parent, teacher, school counsellor or friend, and see your GP (doctor). The sooner you seek help, the sooner you can recover.

Talk about how you are feeling

It can help to talk to your parents about how you are feeling. Or you might prefer to talk to someone outside of the family, such as:

- a counsellor – for example, a school counsellor
- somebody you trust like a close friend, a close friend's parents, a neighbour, or an aunt or uncle
- a telephone counselling service – for example, **Kids Helpline** on **1800 55 1800** or **Lifeline** on **13 11 14**. These services will give you the chance to talk through your feelings about the family breakup
- people your age going through similar experiences – through online forums such as **ReachOut** and **eheadspace**.

Making sense of the breakup

It's important to know that you can't fix or solve a family breakup. It is also not your fault and you should never be made to feel like it is.

Sometimes it can help if you get a better understanding of what is happening. Here are some ways to do that:

- Ask your parents why they have decided to stop living together. Think carefully about when is the right time to ask this question. If someone is upset or emotional, it may be best to wait until they are calm.
- Tell your parents who you would prefer to live with.
- Ask your parents not to take you aside individually to talk about their problems with each other.
- Try to maintain your relationship with each parent separately.
- Talk to other family members about how you feel.

It may take a while for you – and everyone else in the family – to adjust to the change in the family relationship. Everyone in the family will need to make an effort to make things work.

Many people experience family break ups

Every year around 10,000 children and young people contact Kids Helpline about family relationship concerns, including:

- Many children have tried to speak to their parents or other family members but have either been ignored or had their concerns minimised.
- Some children find it difficult to raise problems with their family.
- Some need help to make sense of their concerns before they approach family members.
- Sometimes, kids phone because there is no one else to turn to.

If you need to talk to someone, you can call **Kids Helpline** on **1800 55 1800** any time, and for any reason.

Living arrangements after a family break up

If your family breaks up, it's likely that your living arrangements will change. Some of the possibilities are:

- One of your parents will have sole custody and you will live with that parent.
- Your parents will share custody and your time will be shared between the two of them.
- One parent will have custody of you for the majority of the time. The other parent will have access visits a certain number of times each week, fortnight or month. If your parents live far apart, you may find school holidays are the time you catch up with the parent you don't live with.

Agreeing about who should have custody after a family break up

Sometimes, parents can work out custody arrangements themselves. At other times, they need the help of the Family Court to make this decision.

If custody is decided by the court:

- Your point of view will be considered. The older you are, the more your opinion will count.
- You will be able to talk to a Family Court counsellor if you need to talk to someone outside of the family about the breakup.

If you are unhappy about a custody arrangement, it is a good idea to talk to someone you trust about your feelings and find out what your options are. Sometimes, it is good to talk to someone who is not personally involved with your family.

Where to get help

- **Counsellor**
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. **1800 55 1800**
- **Family Relationships Advice Line** Tel. **1800 050 321** Monday to Friday, 8 am to 8 pm, Saturday, 10 am to 4 pm, except national public holidays
- **Relationships Australia** Tel. **1300 364 277**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14**

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Reach Out

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