

A guide for divorcing parents

How to help your teenagers
through separation and divorce



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Changing the Way Divorce Happens TM

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Separation affects the whole family. This guide is here to help you and your teen through the transition

Separation and divorce are among life's most challenging transitions. No one enters a marriage expecting it to end, and the emotional toll - grief, anger, fear, anxiety, uncertainty - can be overwhelming. Whether you initiated this change or not, know that you're not alone. There are resources, experts, and strategies to support you.

More importantly, your children, especially your teenagers, are navigating this change too. While you're managing legal and financial decisions, they're dealing with emotional shifts they may not fully understand or express. This booklet is here to help. It is designed to give you tools, language, and insight to guide your teen through this transition with care and consistency.

This booklet is divided into 5 key areas for separating and divorcing parents:



- 1.** Demystifying the terminology around separation
- 2.** Talking to teens about separation
- 3.** Why being on the same page matters
- 4.** Moving on, how to handle new relationships
- 5.** Building better communication between parents

Many people choose to work with a divorce mediator to assist them in developing the Parenting Plan (and the finances). The mediator guides the parents through discussions about their children and facilitates resolution should the parents not agree. If there are any safety concerns, you should contact a

Demystifying some of the terminology around separation

Separation Agreement. The separation agreement is the legal document that captures the decisions people have made in terms of their finances and their children. When there are children under the age of 18, a parenting plan needs to be developed. This plan will also become part of the legal separation agreement.

Parenting Plan. This is a detailed plan that describes how parents are going to care for and make decisions regarding their children (parenting time and decision making). This plan serves as an ongoing guide for their decisions but also can assist the parents in the future should they disagree on a matter regarding their children.

Custody. Custody was used to describe who has the **right** to make decisions about the children including education, religion, medical, where the children live, extra-curricular activities, childcare, travel. This word has now been removed from the Divorce Act. We now talk about decision making. Many people have “joint decision-making” of their children even if the child lives primarily with one parent.

Children’s Schedule. The schedule is all about the **division of time** with each parent. Some children spend a relatively equal amount of time with both parents. We call that shared or equal parenting. Sometimes this equal division of time is not possible due to a variety of circumstances (work schedules may not make this possible). The goal of the schedule is to focus on the best interest of the child(ren) while at the same time ensuring the child(ren) can develop healthy relationships with **both** parents. People sometimes think that children over a certain age can decide with whom they wish to live. The truth is, parents of older teens should be making that decision, while potentially discussing options with their teen. We talk about teens having voice, but parents make the decision. When exploring scheduling options, you should consider your child’s maturity, ability to handle transitions or if there are any special needs. Some children do spend relatively equal amounts of time in both houses, some don’t. Teenagers are often very busy with activities, part-time jobs and increased social time with friends. Being flexible with your teen will go a long way in developing a healthy post-separation relationship. You may find yourself feeling more like a chauffeur as you juggle the demands of parenting a teen.

If equal overnights are not possible, play the long game. If for whatever reasons your parenting time cannot include an exact equal division of time, that's ok. Focus on building memories with your teen not on counting hours. When your teen is an adult, they will not be saying *"I only got to sleep at my mom's or dad's on Friday, Saturdays."* Instead, you will hear them say *"Remember when we went to that cottage and there was tornado nearby"* or *"I always remember that my dad and I went camping at least once a year."* Teens don't think in terms of percentages or number of days. Maximizing quality time together is the key. And the quality of your relationship is up to you!

Talking to Teens

Telling your teen about the decision to separate is a conversation that needs to be carefully planned. There is no *one* answer to the question *"when should we tell the children."* Below are some tips and recommended language to consider.

If possible, tell them with both parents present

This is important because a child may blame the parent who is not present. When children see their parents together to have this conversation, it sends them the message that both are still their parents and that is not going to change. They can see you are working together to help them through it.

Try to keep the information about the relationship general (avoid sharing all the details with your children)

It's essential that children ***not*** know all the details of why the separation happened as this confuses them. Telling your teen that adult relationships are complicated, and that: *"we have decided we will live in different houses,"* may be enough.

Provide lots of assurance

Teenagers need to hear that they are not to blame for the separation and that you love them. Telling them this is not their fault is such an important part of this conversation. Be mindful of your tone, body language, and nonverbal cues. Teens may notice sadness, anger, or tension between you even if words are carefully chosen.

The do's and don'ts of telling teens about your separation

- ☒ **Don't say:** "Dad doesn't love mom anymore or mom doesn't love dad anymore"
- ☑ **Instead try:** "We don't love each other in the same way married people should love each other." Or "Sometimes moms and dads have problems and they can't fix them so they decide they are going to live in different houses."

- ☒ **Don't say:** "Mom is leaving us," or "dad is leaving us". Although it may feel that way if one person does not want the separation, you never want to give your teens the message that their parent is leaving them. Children are often filled with uncertainty and fear, especially during the early days.
- ☑ **Instead try:** "We are going to live in different houses. And we are going to make sure you get to spend time in both homes."

- ☒ **Don't say:** "Who would you like to live with?" While it is important to check in and see how the kids are adjusting to their new scheduling, asking them whom they want to live with is a lose-lose question for a child. Children write about how that question puts them in the middle and they feel torn because they know someone will get hurt. Parents should make these decisions.
- ☑ **Instead try:** "We wanted to check in to see how the schedule is working from your perspective. What is challenging for you? What can we do to help?"

"Our separation is a chance for our children to witness two individuals who can rise above adversity and coexist harmoniously."
(Fairway client)

Why being on the same page matters

Whether your teen spends equal time in both houses or not, it is important to be on the same page about expectations, routines and boundaries. You want to avoid conflicting messages and unnecessary tension regarding expectations. Teens may sometimes try to play one parent against the other or be confused with conflicting messages. While these don't necessarily make it into the legal agreement, having conversations as co-parents (some may choose to seek input from their teen as well) with a goal of **consistency in both homes** can go a long way. *While household routines don't need to be exactly the same, aligning on major boundaries helps your teen feel secure and supported.*

Some things you may want to talk about:

Curfew: what are your expectations regarding a teen being out on a school night? Are you comfortable with a range of time? Will weekends be different from school nights?

Driving: what kind of boundaries do you want to establish regarding driving? How many friends can be in the car, how late can your teen be out if driving? What information do they need to provide in terms of where they are going?

Homework routines: some teens can manage the workload at school on their own and others need support and reminders. What does that look like for your child? How will information be communicated between teachers and parents?

Chores/free time/screen time: how do you want to structure free time/screen time and chores? Is there a *'lights out'* time for screens and cell phones? What chores if any, are required?

Home alone: your plan for teens should include a home alone clause (how long or how late can a child be home alone before it triggers the child needing to be in the care of an adult). This is often very much depending on the age, maturity of a teen, so it is important that you discuss this as part of your child's plan.

After school: Do you want to include any routines regarding after school?

Communication: What plan will you have regarding communication with your teen when they are not home? Is a group chat an option? Many families find this helpful so that both parents are informed as to the whereabouts of a teen even if it's not their night. Group chats can also help when parents are contemplating giving consent for an outing. This could avoid the trap of: "mom said yes so long as it's ok with you."

What happens if dad has concerns? Mom already said yes so the teen may get upset with dad. Many parents have an understanding that if a teen asks for something that is outside the regular routine, the parents will discuss with one another *ahead* of time before saying yes or no. *If using group chats, be respectful of tone. Written messages can be misinterpreted.*

Some teens can adjust quite well to small nuances between houses with little or no issues. The greater the difference between both households, the more potential for hiccups you may encounter. The key is to have the conversation with your co-parent and teen to avoid any misunderstandings.

Counselling can be very helpful for teens, particularly in the early transition. Many parents will encourage their teens to see a counselor, at least for a couple of visits, to provide them with a safe space to talk about their feelings. Consider seeking additional support for yourselves too.

Counsellors can be a valuable resource for the family both in the early days and even in dealing with future changes. While many teens can feel shy about 'going to counselling', the growing popularity of remote sessions can help overcome some of the anxious feelings.

Moving on with new relationships

New relationships, dating, moving on can be an important part of the healing process. So how do you handle new relationships when parenting a teenager?

You don't need to share details of your dating experiences

Teenagers likely understand the concept of dating, maybe even on-line profiles, but they still view you as their parents, not their friend. Treating your teen as a confidant can blur the line of parent/teen. They may still be processing their feelings about the separation and need the space to do that.

Avoid introducing new people until the relationship is more permanent

While a person can never know if any relationship is permanent, we often talk about the difference between 'dating someone' and being in a relationship. Even teens can get attached to new people so take the time to ensure the new relationship is more permanent before introducing teens.

Give space and grace if your new partner has children of their own

You may have been dating someone for awhile and now are ready to introduce your children to them. If your new partner has kids and you have had time to get to know them, give some space for this transition to happen for your own kids. Start small with some joint activities (movie, dinner, bowling). This will give kids a chance to slowly get to know one another.

Respect your teen's emotional pace

Even if you're ready to move forward, your teen might still be adjusting. It's okay if they're not immediately warm to your new partner. Give them time without pressure.

When navigating special occasions, give your teen permission to just have their parents attend

If you are in a new relationship, don't rush your kids by insisting your new partner attend the ceremony or celebration. Asking your child or better yet, not pushing a new partner to attend, gives your kids the space to enjoy their special event. Even in the most amicable separation, kids sometimes worry about how a parent will feel if they acknowledge the new partner of their

other parent. Kids deserve to celebrate this event with no worries of trying to balance their time between both parents. And if you can, try to have one post-graduation celebration if possible. Avoid the lunch with one parent, dinner with the other if you can. While this is not always possible, it sure goes a long way in helping ease the burden on your child.

Building better communication between parents after separation

You've finalized the separation and moved into new routines - so it's over now, right? Not quite. Parenting doesn't end when the relationship does, especially if you have a shared parenting arrangement and joint decision-making. In fact, raising teenagers together after a breakup can require even stronger communication.

Teens are navigating their own emotional storms, and the way you and your co-parent interact plays a big role in how well they cope. Studies show that the most significant factor in how children adjust to divorce is the level of conflict between parents. For your teen's sake, it's essential to keep that conflict to a minimum. That starts with changing how you communicate.

Remember, your presence and emotional support matter far more than your relationship status. Celebrating your teen's milestones with grace and understanding leaves a lasting impact.

You don't have to be best friends - but you do need to be effective partners in parenting. Here are some practical ways to make that happen:

- **Separate your roles.** Your romantic relationship may be over, but your parenting partnership continues. It's normal to feel loss, anger, or sadness, but your teen still needs both of you to show up as their parents. Make a clear distinction between your personal history and your parenting responsibilities.
 - **Treat it like a business relationship.** Think of parenting after separation as a joint partnership. Set up short, structured meetings to talk about school events, sports schedules, or health needs. Keeping conversations goal-focused can help avoid emotional detours.
 - **Give a heads-up.** Instead of calling out of the blue, agree on how and when to talk. One strategy that works well is texting to schedule calls in advance - and sticking to a time limit, like 20 minutes. If you need more time, book a follow-up. Respecting boundaries helps keep things calm and constructive.
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- **Plan ahead for changes.** Life is busy, and changes to the routine are sometimes necessary. If you need to switch weekends or adjust the schedule, give as much notice as possible. Don't assume availability - ask and explain why and be open to compromise.
- **Ask respectfully, don't demand.** Teens are watching how you interact. Model respectful communication by asking rather than telling. Saying, "Would you be open to switching weekends so I can attend my nephew's birthday?" sets a better tone than issuing a directive. When you show flexibility, you're more likely to get it in return.
- **Create a communication plan.** Sit down and agree on the basics: What topics need regular discussion? How will you share updates? What's the plan for vacations, school events, medical needs, or emergencies? A clear plan reduces misunderstandings and reassures your teen that even though things have changed, you're still united in supporting them.

If you can shift your perspective from past hurts to shared goals, you'll help your teen feel secure and supported. It's not easy—but your efforts to communicate better will make a real difference in their ability to thrive.

Give them space and grace

Separation and divorce are difficult. It is even more challenging when trying to juggle the demands of parenting teenagers. Even though your teenager may be very mature and responsible, they are still going through their own grieving and adjustment. Give them the space and grace to be kids, ensure consistency and most of all, be there for them as they navigate the many life changes ahead of them.

Parenting through separation isn't about being perfect - it's about being present, consistent, and compassionate. If you're feeling overwhelmed, you're not alone. Reach out. Support is available.

Helping people transition through separation and divorce with dignity, optimism and hope.

Fairway Divorce Solutions is a Divorce Mediation service, with offices across Canada. With almost 20 years of experience, our team of mediators have helped hundreds of families navigate separation.

"I wanted you to know that we are both settled into our new homes. Thank-you for helping us put our children's needs first. The transition for them was so smooth, thanks to your guidance. We now have a new motto. One Family – Two Homes." (Fairway client)

"Our experience with Fairway was exceptional. It made a difficult situation much easier to navigate going forward into a co-parenting arrangement." (Fairway client)

*The greatest gift you can
give your children is the gift
of getting along, so they
never feel the separation
had anything to do with them.*

Fairway Divorce Solutions®

25 Young St. E, Waterloo
www.fairwaydivorce.com

