

voices
in the middle

A guide for parents of teenagers



www.voicesinthemiddle.org.uk

Introduction

This guide is for parents of teenagers. It is created by Voices in the Middle, a project campaigning and supporting children and young people in the middle of divorce and separation.

With the help of young people, we are also building a dedicated online space for all young people going through divorce & separation in the UK. This will include age appropriate content for 13-19 year olds on what is going on, ways in which they can share their voice and support for their health and wellbeing. Alongside content, it will also provide interactive tools such as friendly discussion boards with peer and expert support.

All the quotations in this guide come from stories that have been shared by young people with Voices in the Middle.

Please support our campaign and building a dedicated place to go for teenagers in the middle of divorce and separation at www.voicesinthemiddle.org.uk

In this guide, you can read about:

1. Your teenager's rights
2. How teenagers typically react to parents' splitting up
3. Your teenager's well-being
4. How to talk to your teenager about splitting up
5. Real life! When things don't go to plan

**“Stuck in the middle.
Not a good place to be.
I'm still only little,
And this is hurting me.”**

- El, 13



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Creative Commons (CC BY 2.0)

1. Your teenager's rights

Your teenager has a right to information, support and advice about your separation. Children in separating families also have a right to express their feelings to both parents, and need to be listened to and heard without judgement.

“My advice to young people who are going through the difficulty of divorced parents is not to let them get you involved in their disputes.”

- Oli, 17

To help your child get through the separation process, check you are focusing on the following things:

- Do they feel loved and cared for by both parents?
- Are they in contact with relatives on both sides of the family?
- Are they free from financial worries?
- Do they feel supported with their schoolwork?
- Do they feel able to express their own opinions?
- Are they well informed about their living arrangements and are these arrangements reliable and flexible?
- Do they have an opportunity to talk about their feelings?
- Are they protected from potentially harmful information and material, including online, about the separation?
- Are they safe from adults who might abuse or neglect them?

2. Your teenager's well-being

It's all about relationships!

Research shows that family relationships are fundamental for all children and teenagers. It hurts hugely when these relationships are disrupted. You need to protect the relationships that your teenager has as much as you can.

- Both parents should keep a relationship with their teenage child(ren) (as long as that relationship is considered to be safe for the child).
- Each parent should support their child to enjoy a positive relationship with the other parent and also with other members of the family.
- Your child should not be exposed to continuing conflict.
- New partners should be introduced gradually, with no expectation that they will replace the other parent.
- Research shows that three things are potentially damaging to children:
 - Being exposed to a parent who abuses them or neglects them.
 - Losing a relationship with a parent who is not abusive or neglectful.
 - Being exposed to parents in severe conflict with each other.
- It's a double whammy for your child if serious conflict between you results in him/her losing a positive relationship with one of you. That's a nightmare scenario for your child – please don't go there!

3. How teenagers typically react

Teenage years are a time when children begin to move away from the family and establish themselves as independent young adults. As friends and social lives are their central focus, you need to be flexible regarding time arrangements between homes.

Developmentally, teenagers have a tendency to be somewhat cynical about the world and when parents divorce, those feelings may intensify. Often they will react by either rushing into intimate relationships or by avoiding commitment. They can experience friendship difficulties at school.

It is a teenager's job to explore, experiment and make mistakes. Rather than trying to talk your teenager out of these experiences, it is best to present the value of learning from your experiences and guide them on how they can make considered choices in their own lives.

Because teenagers are young adults, they are often exposed to more adult information than younger children. However, their brains are still under formation and they can often think about things more as a child than an adult. Don't make the mistake of using your teenagers as confidants or overburdening them with intimate details of the divorce. Even though they are older, they still do not want to be caught in the middle, and they certainly don't want to think about their parents as romantic or sexual beings.

Teenagers need:

- Flexible time arrangements with parents so they can pursue their own social lives.
- Their parents to stay interested and involved in their lives and activities.
- To be consulted about decisions that affect their lives.
- Reassurance about their future.
- Continued structure and discipline.
- Support in expressing and managing feelings in healthy ways.
- Not to be overburdened with adult information.
- Access to good advice and information – e.g. www.voicesinthemiddle.org.uk.

“I fell out with friends, they didn't understand.”

- Anon, 14

“The breakup is between you and your partner, what is forgotten is that the child still sees you both the same way. No matter what you think of the other, please don't influence your child to think the same way that you do about their parent. Try to put your differences aside and support their decisions for their sake. Let them decide for themselves.”

- Jade, 17

If your teenage child has younger siblings it can be tempting to place them in a carer role.

Your teenage child will need to focus on their own well-being at this challenging time.

Encourage all siblings to look out for one another but don't ask older siblings to take on a parenting role. This will only add to their feelings of stress, confusion and anger.

4. How to talk to your teenager about splitting up

Right at the top of the list are two main messages from parents:

- We will work hard to make sure you will keep your relationship with both parents.
- It's not your fault.

Teenagers, just like younger children, tend to blame themselves when things go wrong. When parents split up, it can be hard for young people to understand that the parents are solely responsible – it can feel unsafe to think badly of the people they depend on. Be absolutely clear with them that it is not their fault.

Your teenager will also want to hear:

- We will never stop loving you, even if our feelings for each other have changed.
- We know this will be hard for you, and we are sorry – we never meant this to happen.
- It is possible to love both parents still.
- The family is not gone, it is changing. You will always have us as family.
- It's OK for you to be really upset and to find the whole thing very difficult. Young people can heal after disrupted relationships, but at the time it really hurts and it can take a long time.

Make time for several conversations with them. Keep things simple to start with, just the fact that you are separating and some of the key messages listed above. They are likely to be very upset and need time to work out their worries and questions. Sometimes you won't have answers to their questions. Promise them they will be the first to know as and when you do. However much it might be true, don't blame the other parent for the divorce in front of your teenager. It puts them in a very difficult situation if you do.

“Parents, don't bad mouth the other parent to your child, we want to be able to form our own opinion on what's happened and it makes us upset to see someone we love bad mouthing someone who, although you might not love them anymore, we very much do.”

- Josie, 15

IT ISN'T YOUR FAULT. It's very easy to believe that your parents' unhappiness is because of you, it isn't (I promise).”

- Brianna, 16

Teenagers need to be involved in the conversation about plans for the future. Sometimes they come up with creative solutions that their parents have not been able to work out. Talk to them and listen to their ideas. If they are involved, they will have more ownership of the solution, which makes it more likely to succeed. Having an active role can build their self-esteem and confidence after a very hard knock. Tell them about www.voicesinthemiddle.org.uk, where they can see other young people doing the same and can see that it works.

Think particularly about the following issues:

- Christmas and birthdays.
- Time with friends and for out-of-school activities (sport, drama, music, etc.) – teenagers need flexibility.
- Time with other members of the family they may feel close to (e.g. grandparents).
- Contact with pets.

“67% of children say they should have a voice. 19% said they did.”

- Resolution report, 2015

If you are planning to move in with another family, take it very slowly for the sake of your teenager and listening to him/her throughout. Just because you've fallen in love again doesn't mean they will. Be clear this is not a replacement parent – instead, it is an opportunity to build up new relationships with others. Getting on with step-siblings of the same age can be incredibly hard (especially when teenage hormones are all over the place!) If your teenager isn't ready to meet, get on with or live with your new partner and their family, listen to that and give it time.

If the conversation with your children starts to upset you a lot, and you start reacting unhelpfully, do things you know help to keep you calm – deep breathing, time out. Tears are fine, shouting is not. Use your active listening skills – this means listening with all your attention without jumping in to explain, defend or fix things. When it is your turn to respond, use statements like "I can understand why you feel that way..." or "I can see how difficult this is..." It's one way of keeping the temperature down during a conversation that is incredibly hard for you all.

And remember one really important thing. Time heals. The situation right now might be intolerable and often the only thing you can do is wait, while keeping all lines of communication open with your teenager. It's a completely natural reaction to hold on tight to control a really frightening situation, but the most important thing is that the doorway to both parents is open to your teenager, even if he/she does not want to walk through it right now.

“It’s going to be hard to adjust to new families if you get them (step-parents,-step-brothers/sisters). You’re probably going to argue with them for a while, give them a chance, you’re new to them too.”

- Brianna, 16

“It took me over five years to accept what had happened and finally open up to my friends about my family.”

- Cerys, 15

“But just know that hand on heart, it does get easier as time allows you to heal. It took me 10 years to realise that I wasn’t to blame for my parents’ divorce but once I did, I felt much better.”

- Niamh, 16

“Circumstances change and it’s horrible but it isn’t permanent, I promise things do get better.”

- Jade, 17

5. Real life! When things don't go to plan

My teenager won't talk to me. What do I do?

This is quite normal. Teenagers may choose to protect themselves by:

- Changing the subject when you talk about it.
- Choosing not to tell others, such as friends, teachers or family members.
- Making up excuses for the change in the family.
- Talking about the family as if nothing has changed.
- Trying to plan events that involve both parents being together.
- Resisting spending time in the other home with their other parent because it makes the situation more real for them.

Let them. Give them time and space. Tell them you will listen to whatever they say, whenever they say it.

The more independent-minded adolescent tends to deal more aggressively with divorce, often reacting in a mad, rebellious way, more resolved to disregard family discipline and take care of himself since parents have failed to keep commitments to the family that were originally made.

Where the child may have tried to get parents back, the adolescent may try to get back at parents. Where the child felt grief, the adolescence has a grievance. "If they can't be trusted to stay together and take care of the family, then I need to start relying more on myself." "If they can break their marriage and put themselves first, then I can put myself first too." "If they don't mind hurting me, then I can I don't mind hurting them."

Now the adolescent can act aggressively to take control of his life by behaving even more distantly and defiantly, more determined to live his life his way, more dedicated to his self-interest than before. He feels increasingly autonomous in a family situation that feels disconnected. He now feels more impelled and entitled to act on his own.

For the parent who divorces with an adolescent, the young person's increased dedication to self-interest must be harnessed by insisting on increased responsibility.

Dr Carl E Pickhardt in Psychology Today.

“What I’m telling you is, don’t keep it bottled up to yourself, don’t let it build up into occasional outbursts, it’s not good. Tell your sibling, your partner, your friend, your teacher? I’m not saying everyone must know; they don’t need to, but seek advice in another person, it helps! TELL SOMEONE!”

- Tyla, 15



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My child is really angry with me. What do I do?

Anger is normal and understandable on the part of your teenager, but very difficult to manage as a parent, particularly if you are really upset already!

Typical expressions of anger in teenagers include:

- Antisocial behaviour, breaking rules.
- Disrespect and saying "I hate you".
- Blaming one or both parents.
- Emotional outbursts.
- Engaging in risky and dangerous behaviours.
- Withdrawal/shut-down.

Don't argue with the anger. Say you are ready to talk and listen. Say you understand how incredibly painful it all is. Tell them it is OK to be angry, but that it's not OK to put themselves or others at risk because of it.

On www.voicesinthemiddle.org.uk there is advice from other young people about managing anger. If things are really difficult, look for help – for example, your GP, Young Minds, Rethink, Gingerbread.

“This anger was massive inside of me for a good 6 months, my panic attacks became more frequent and I didn't feel like I had anyone to talk to. The only thing I had to keep my calm was my sport after a while, sprinting out the anger, kicking the football so hard when I scored that goal.”

- Bryony 16

“When I was in my last two years of secondary school I started having counselling and I remember one day having a bad anxiety attack and just ran out of school. I couldn't cope with people being loud and shouting and I found it hard in a classroom full of people.”

- Sian

My teenager is trying to fix the family. What do I do?

Young people can, consciously or unconsciously, try to fix things so that the family is 'back to normal'. They might promise to be good, create events that require their parents to work together, develop physical symptoms (e.g. stomach ache, headache) that require both parents to care for them together, play up at school and get into trouble so that you have to focus on them not you, or make you feel guilty and ashamed. This is all part of the process of accepting the separation. It can take teenagers a long time to accept that the separation is going ahead.

My child is showing signs of depression. What do I do?

Signs of depression include:

- Withdrawing.
- Being sad all the time.
- Being very tired all the time.
- Losing enjoyment in things they use to like.
- Being agitated and/or irritable.
- Crying a lot.
- Not sleeping at night or sleeping all the time.
- Indicating self-hatred through statements such as "I wish I had never been born" or "Life would be better without me around."

Reassurance that it is OK to feel sad can be helpful, but try hard not to overcompensate in an attempt to avoid the sadness. Accept that they are going to have these feelings, just as you are, and help them talk about it and get the support they need from you and others in their lives.

On www.voicesinthemiddle.org.uk there is advice from other young people about feeling sad without going under.

If things are really bad and you think mental illness might be present, look for help, for example, your GP. Organisations like Young Minds and Rethink can help too.

My teenager has rejected me. What do I do?

A child can act angrily and hurtfully against a parent. This may be because they believe that parent is to blame, a story that may be encouraged by the other parent. This is a painful experience for the rejected parent. It is difficult to help your teenager without first getting the support you need, legally and emotionally.

Give them time and space. Leave the door open so they can come to you when they feel able. If they have rejected you, you cannot force the pace.

My children are falling out with each other. What do I do?

Sibling relationships reflect the marital relationship, both within intact families and those going through separation. Your children may well take their frustration and anger out on one another, especially if they feel unable to express it to you as parents directly. Encourage your children to engage in positive activities together, make sure you spend time all together and praise them when they are getting on well.

Talk to your children about how supportive they can be for one another if they work together. Teenagers will be quick to point out the flaws in the marital relationship. Explain to them that this is a different relationship to siblings but that practising getting on together now will help build up great skills for future friendships and relationships.



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Support Voices in the Middle!

Support children and young people in the middle of divorce and separation.

We hope this guide has helped you and your family.

Please help us to support the 1 in 3 children will see their parents split up before they reach their 16th birthday.

For young people, this time in their life can be an intensely stressful and painful experience. Many suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, anger or depression.

Join us to build a dedicated online space for **120,000** young people who are in the in the middle of family divorce & separation across the UK.

Our online space will include:

Lots of Content: Age appropriate content for 13-19 year olds on what is going on, ways in which they can share their voice, and support for their health and well-being.

Interactive Support:

Friendly discussion boards with peer and expert support from our moderators and Service Partners. Directory of local youth organisations to find someone to talk to nearby.

Useful Resources:

Guides for parents and family law & mediation organisations on supporting children and young people in the middle of divorce and separation.

That Silence

Was it a blessing or a curse?

That Silence.

Did it mask the cracks or make them worse?

That Silence.

Were the soundless arguments

Protective? Secretive? Catastrophic?

Were the avoided conversations

Out of love? Out of sympathy? Out of cowardice?

That Silence.

Would snide remarks have softened the surprise?

Would shouting matches have stopped the tears?

Would shattered plates have been the warning signs?

My unanswered questions.

Because of

That Silence.

Image by Vic, Creative Commons
(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

“There were no arguments in front of us, no shouting matches across the stairs, no tears, no slamming doors. I know they did this to protect us. If there was any way to redeem the marriage, our family, I know they’d have wanted to. The downside of That Silence though was that it was a complete shock to us. There were no pre-warning signs to prepare us.”

- Abigail, 16

In this guide, you can read about how to talk to and support your teenager in the middle of divorce and separation, including their rights, well-being and protecting their family relationships.

Written by the team at Voices in the Middle, including Duncan Fisher OBE and Martin Desborough, experienced family sector professionals who have created and managed support services for over 2 million families who have been through divorce and separation in the UK. This resource has also been reviewed and guided by Dr Angharad Rudkin, a child clinical psychologist at the University of Southampton.

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