

Changeovers and helping children move between two homes

A Parenting Through Separation programme factsheet.

1. What to expect at changeover between parents

- Young children may be clingy, cry or put up a fight.
- Older children may complain and not want to go.

2. Understand why your children may be upset about moving between homes

- It's hard for your children to leave you behind. They love you and don't want to be without you.
- They may feel guilty about going away to have a good time with their other parent because they worry about you being left behind.

3. How you can help reduce your child's stress when it's time for them to leave you

- Gently encourage them to go with their other parent. Be relaxed and positive.
- Remind them of the fun things they've done before with their other parent.

Don't:

- say 'I'll miss you' (tell your children that you'll be okay so they don't feel guilty.)
- put your children in an awful position with your ex by asking them to take difficult messages or to act as a spy.
- break into your children's time with their other parent, because it can be unsettling for them.

4. Things to do when your children come to stay

- Let them know before they come about the things you'll do together so they've something to look forward to.
- If money's tight (as it usually is after separation), do fun things that don't cost much, like going to the park or beach.
- Help them feel safe and at home. Make sure they have a space for themselves and somewhere special for their things.
- Make sure you're prepared and able to look after your children when they're with you, if something goes wrong.
- Let them contact their other parent while they're with you, maybe with a phone call or text message.

5. Managing conflict at changeovers

- Be reasonably flexible and understanding if your ex is late because of things like traffic problems.
- If contact with your ex always leads to conflict, use a friend's house or a school as a neutral drop-off point.

6. Understand why your children might be upset when they come back to your home

- They may be tired and upset at leaving their other parent.
- They might feel guilty about having a good time without you, especially if you seem sad when they get back.
- They may be upset by your questions and not know what to say without hurting your feelings or feeling disloyal.

7. Helping your children when they get back

- Try to understand they're feeling a bit unsettled and give extra care to help them, with food, sleep and affection.
- Take care of yourself so you're okay when they get back. See friends; get some exercise. Don't drink too much.
- Don't criticise your ex in front of your children.

8. Remember, it's worth it

- It can be difficult at times but the best way your children can get through your separation is to have a close relationship with both their parents.
- With your support, changeovers will get easier for your children over time.

9. Some exceptions

- It can be too hard for a child to travel alone to see a parent. They may need an adult with them, depending on their age and state of mind, or the adult may need to come to them.
- It's not normal for a child to seem frightened about going with a parent. Take this seriously and get advice from a professional if you're worried.

To find out more, go to

justice.govt.nz/family/resources

How to work with new partners and step-families

A Parenting Through Separation programme factsheet.

Tips for parents

1. Before you start a new relationship

- Your children will get over your separation more easily if you delay bringing a new person into their lives for a time.
- Talk with them about why it might be good for you to have a new partner in the future, so they can get used to the idea.
- Talk with them about what could help them deal with a new partner.

2. Introducing a new partner

- Make the first meeting short and casual.
- Choose a neutral place, like a park or a playground.
- Relax and don't pressure your children for approval.
- Put yourself in their shoes – there are lots of reasons why they might not seem very keen at first:
 - Children often hope their parents will get back together. Your new partner is a sign that's not going to happen.
 - They're probably worried about sharing your time and attention with your new partner.
- Think carefully about how much physical affection you show to your new partner around your children. It's normal for the children to dislike it at first.

3. Have an open mind

- When you start a new relationship, don't expect a traditional family where everyone's together all the time and automatically loves each other.
- Don't think of your new partner's relationship with your children as a 'parent-child' relationship. Instead, aim for them just to get on in a positive way.
- Spend time with your children alone so they don't always have to share your attention with your new partner.
- Your children still need to keep up their relationship with their other parent (and their family/whānau).
- Listen to what your children tell you about what they need and how things are going for them.

4. Making it work

- Focus on your children, even though you're involved in beginning your new relationship.

- Reassure them that you don't want your new partner to replace their other parent.
- Help build up your children's self-esteem. If they feel good about themselves, that'll be good for the whole family.

Tips for step-parents

1. What to expect

- Your relationship with your partner's children will not be the same as a natural parent's. Over time though, it may become warm, long-lasting and important.
- Be patient about building up trust. Be prepared for it to take a long time with a child older than 10.
- Don't expect your partner's children to call you 'mum' or 'dad' (unless they say they want to in a special case, for example, if there's no contact at all with a natural parent).

2. What you can do

- Be supportive and do what you can to help your partner's children keep all their important relationships going.
- Let your partner be responsible for parenting their children in their own way.
- You'll need to think carefully and plan your reactions calmly. You'll probably have to stay positive, even when you don't feel like it.
- Don't tell off your partner's children. They'll resent it if you do, especially if they're older than 10 or 11.

Tips for when your ex has a new partner

1. What to expect

- Your children may end up with a warm and close relationship with their step-parent that lasts a long time but that won't affect your relationship with them.

2. What you can do

- Your children may need your encouragement to talk to your ex-partner about any problems they're having – for example, sharing attention with their step-parent.
- Talk to your ex if you're worried how things are going for your children, through a neutral third person or with a counsellor if necessary.